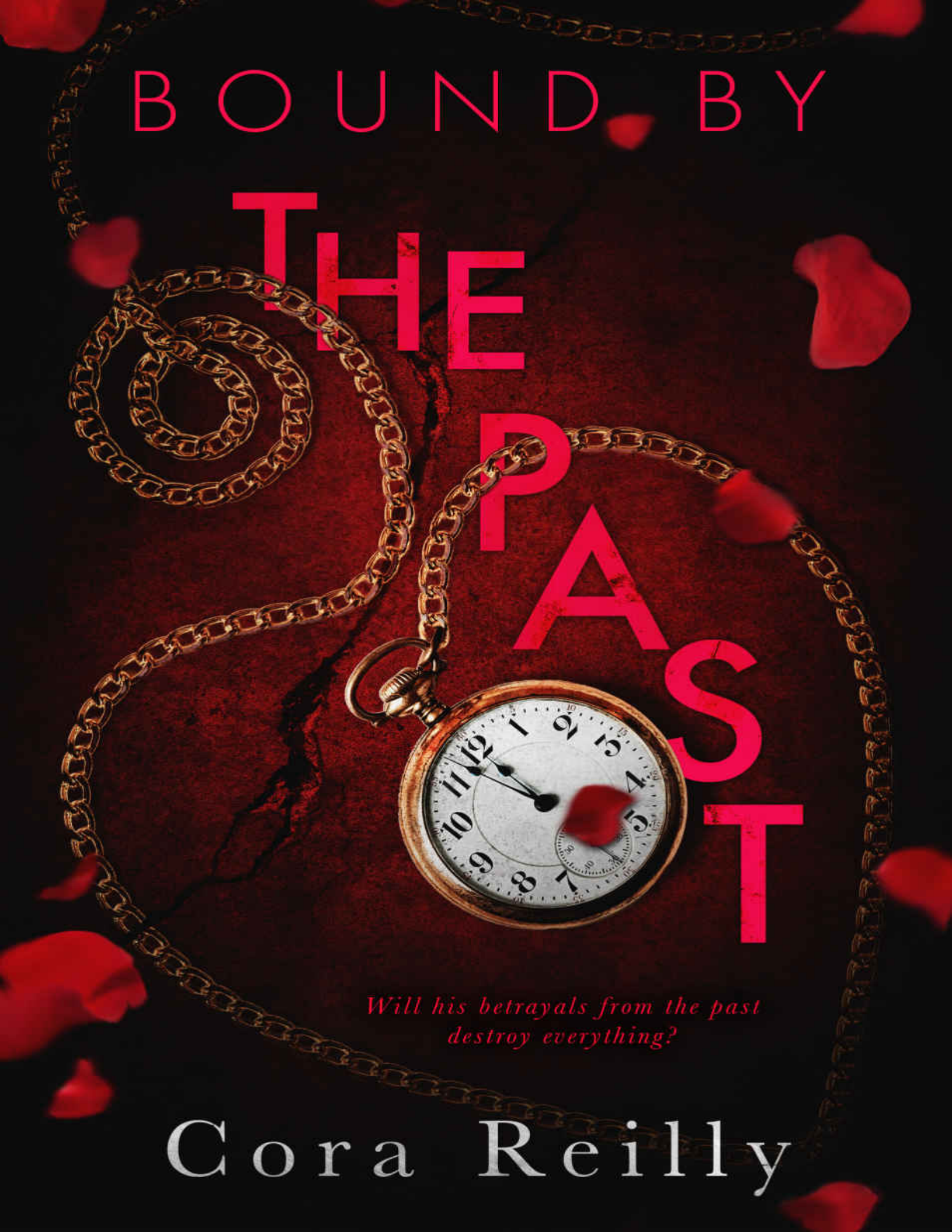
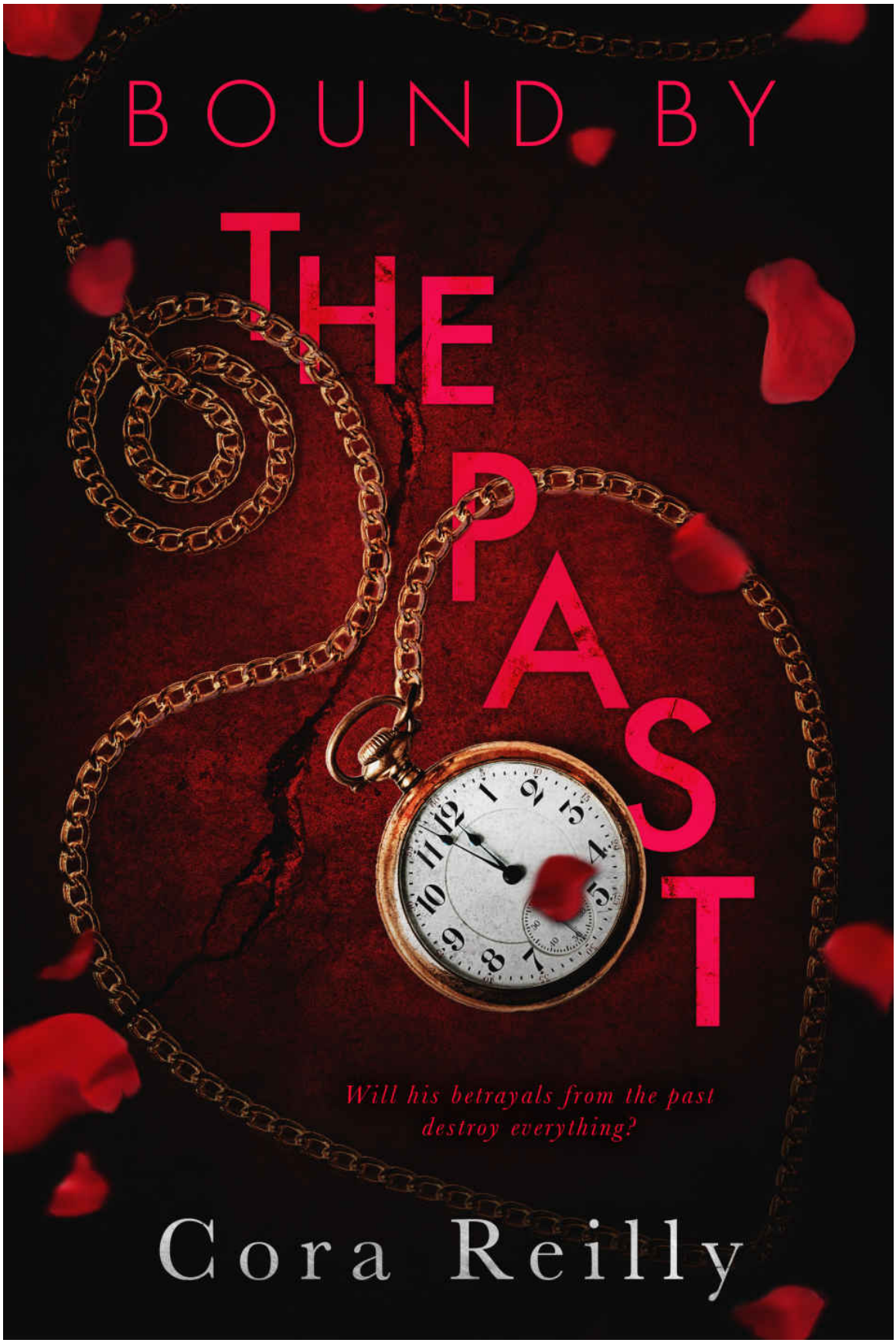
BOUND BY THE PAST



Will his betrayals from the past destroy everything?

Cora Reilly


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THE PAST
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BOUND BY THE PAST

Born in Blood Mafia Chronicles #7



Cora Reilly

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Glossary

Dante

My life’s a tale of betrayal.
I killed so many because they betrayed our cause, because they betrayed the Outfit.
A hypocrite. A liar. A murderer.
That’s what I am.
Five times I betrayed the Outfit. With my blood I made a vow to our cause, swore my life to it, promised to put the Outfit first. Above all else.
Five times I chose a woman over the good of the Outfit. I betrayed my father. My vow. My men.
You reap what you sow.
Would my betrayals destroy everything I swore to protect?

Valentina

On our wedding day I made a vow to stand by Dante’s side.
In good and in bad times.
To love him through it all.
Growing up in the mafia, I knew the challenges in our life would be numerous. I never expected them to tear at the very base of our family, of our existence.

Author’s note

This book isn’t a standalone. You should read (at least) *Bound By Duty* before starting *Bound By The Past*. It is, however, recommended that you read *Bound By Honor, Bound By Duty, Bound By Hatred, Bound By Temptation* and *Bound By Love*, as well as *Twisted Loyalties* and *Twisted Pride* in advance because this book entails spoilers for all of the aforementioned books.

PROLOGUE

Dante

Betrayal is punishable by death.

I killed so many because they betrayed our cause, because they betrayed the Outfit.

A hypocrite. A liar. A murderer.

That’s what I was.

Capo. Boss. Judge over life and death.

That’s why I was still here, not dead for my crimes, for my betrayal.

Five times I betrayed the Outfit. With my blood, I’d made a vow to our cause, had sworn my life to it, promised to put

the Outfit first. Above all else.

Five times I'd chosen a woman over the good of the Outfit. I had betrayed my father. My vow. My men.

Some Capos considered themselves above the law, above failure. They couldn't betray the cause because *they were* the cause. They couldn't fail because they were without failure. I didn't share those beliefs. A Capo wasn't the cause in itself. The Outfit was, and I was accountable for my actions.

And yet my betrayals remained unpunished, at least by the laws of our world. But I'd paid with every betrayal with a betrayal in turn. I'd betrayed and been betrayed. Justice in its purest form.

You reap what you sow.

My life was a tale of betrayal. Eventually I'd have to make sacrifices that could cost me everything if I wanted to preserve what mattered the most.

THE FIRST BETRAYAL

Dante, nineteen years old

Dante

Muffled cries made me stop in my tracks in the hallway. The wails came from the library. I followed the sound and opened the heavy wood door. Ines sat in the armchair in her favorite reading nook, a book in her lap, but I doubted she could see a single letter of the words on the pages before her. Tears stained her cheeks.

My sister wasn't a crier, had never been, and except for a few occasions when she'd been a young girl, I had never seen her cry. Our father had taught us to suppress any kind of emotional turmoil.

I stepped in, making my presence known. Ines' blue eyes flew up, her body tensing, but she relaxed when she spotted me. "Oh, it's you." She wiped at her tears quickly, avoiding my gaze. I closed the door before I walked over to her and sank down on the small poof she usually used to prop up her feet while reading.

"What's the matter?" I asked, forcing my voice to remain calm even as my worry and protectiveness made it difficult.

She fumbled with the pages of her book, swallowing hard. "Father decided to whom I'll be given in marriage."

Ines was sixteen, so it was time to make that decision. That Father had put it off for so long was only because it gave him leverage. The tremor in her voice raised my worry. "Pietro asked for your hand."

He was a good choice. He was a quiet, restrained man, unleashing his dark side only when required, like me. I had a feeling he'd keep it well contained in a marriage.

She nodded then threw herself at me. After a moment of shock, I wrapped my arm around her shoulders. “Ines, tell me what’s the matter. *Now*.”

“He’s giving me to Jacopo Scuderi!”

Tension radiated through my body. “What?” I growled.

Ines sniffled, her tears soaking my collar and my throat. She didn’t stop trembling and shivering. I’d never seen her like this, but given what she’d revealed, it seemed the appropriate reaction.

Jacopo and I had worked together often in the past, not by choice on my part. Father wanted me to work with the Scuderis seeing as they were his Consigliere’s sons, but I abhorred Jacopo deeply. He was a cruel, vengeful being that thrived on demeaning people he considered less—women, low soldiers subject to his command, and his younger brother—and while I was a cruel and vengeful man, I didn’t find satisfaction in humiliating others, least of all women.

The few times I’d been forced to visit one of our whorehouses, I’d seen firsthand what Jacopo considered fun. I’d heard even more horror stories from his younger brother Rocco whenever he had been drunk and unable to shut his big mouth. Jacopo was a sadist, in bed and otherwise. I couldn’t imagine Ines knew the extent of his depravity, and yet she knew he was the worst choice.

Stifling my fury, I said, “Are you sure it’s decided on? Father didn’t tell me.”

Ines pulled back, her eyes full of misery. “It’s settled. He told me this morning right after his meeting with the

Scuderis.”

I nodded, realizing why Father had made his choice. It was because I’d refused to marry anyone but Carla. I’d defied him and he’d realized he had no way of forcing or punishing me, so he’d finally given in to his Consigliere’s demand. Father knew what kind of men the Scuderis were. He knew what kind of man Jacopo was, and yet he gave Ines to him. He’d more than once dangled my sister’s fate over my head.

I touched Ines’ shoulder gently. “I’ll have a talk with him.”

“He won’t change his mind. He gave the Scuderis his word,” she whispered, her shoulders starting to shake under more sobs.

I stood and walked out. Ines was a trophy for Jacopo. He and his father had been asking Father to give her hand in marriage to Jacopo for years.

I headed for Father’s office, trying to remain calm. Nothing infuriated Father more than when he couldn’t draw a reaction out of me. In recent years a power shift had happened, it was gradual, but definitely there. He couldn’t punish me with pain anymore, not after years of numbing me to it. I knocked at his door, my knuckles stinging from the force of it. Barging in and demanding answers was what I really wanted to do, but Father was still Capo, still master of this house, and expected respect from everyone around.

“Come in,” Father drawled.

I schooled my face into a mask of calm. It wouldn't be wise to give Father ammunition against me. Stepping inside, my eyes fell on Father who was sitting in his desk chair and looking down at his calendar. We looked very much alike—a fact people never stopped mentioning. Same cold blue eyes, blond hair, and aloof attitude. Every morning I woke, I swore to myself I'd be a better man. A better Capo. A better husband. A better father.

"I'm trying to decide when we'll hold both weddings. Your sister's next year and yours the year after." He looked up with a calculating smile. Ines was too young to marry. "Or would you prefer to wait a couple more years before marrying? You're only nineteen. Twenty-one then. Maybe you need a bit more time to enjoy other women."

Carla would be nineteen in two years, one year older than Ines, and it would be unfair toward her to make her wait, and I didn't want to. I wanted Carla. "No. I don't need to wait." I paused. "But I'm not here to discuss my wedding."

Father tilted his head in mock curiosity. "Why are you here then?"

He knew damn well why I was here. Stifling my annoyance, I said, "To discuss Ines' marriage with you. Jacopo isn't someone we should consider bringing into our family."

"As the son of my Consigliere and your future Consigliere, it's the expected bond. The Scuderis have been waiting for Ines. Jacopo is very eager to marry your sister. He's been refusing every other woman so far. Rocco is

already married and will certainly soon have an heir. Jacopo deserves to be rewarded for his patience."

I didn't mention that Rocco already had two daughters. For my father, girls weren't worth anything, which was why he treated Ines like a trophy to hand around. I shook my head. "He's too old for Ines, Father. And his reputation leaves a lot to be desired. Maybe you haven't heard the rumors but I've been working with Jacopo long enough to know he's a sadist and psychopath. You can't allow Ines to be at his mercy."

Father gave me a look as if I didn't understand the first thing about life. "If Ines answers to his demands, she'll be fine. Each of us has to make sacrifices. She should be proud that she's given to someone of his status."

I regarded him, realizing he wouldn't let me talk him out of this. "You're making a mistake."

He raised his finger. "And you should remember your place, Dante. You are my heir, true, but I'm still the Capo of the Outfit, still the master of this house."

I swallowed my anger. I needed to be clever about this. Arguing with Father wouldn't change a thing. I gave a terse nod.

"You're working with Jacopo and Rocco tomorrow. You should congratulate him."

"I will," I gritted out.



Later that day Pietro called me and asked for a meeting. I knew what this was about. Given Jacopo's tendency to brag about everything, he'd likely told everyone about his bond to Ines.

We met at the bar of one of our riverboat casinos for a drink. After dropping off my drink in front of me, the bartender kept his distance, sensing my dark mood.

Pietro was a little over two years older than me and currently working in Chicago before he'd take over as Underboss of Minneapolis from his father in a few years. I was nursing my whiskey when he sank down on the stool beside me, motioning for the barkeeper to give him the same I had.

I glanced toward him.

His shirt was wrinkled and his dark hair all over the place. The second the tumbler sat in front of him, he grabbed it and downed it in one gulp. Then his somber eyes met mine. "Don't let Jacopo get his hands on Ines, Dante."

I turned the glass around on the bar. Pietro had asked for Ines' hand twice. As future Underboss of Minneapolis, he was a good choice. He was only six years older than her, not twelve like Jacopo, and most importantly, he wasn't a sadist. "Why do you want Ines?" I asked him tiredly.

He frowned. "Because I respect her. Despite her age, she knows how to carry herself. She's proud and elegant and beautiful."

"And a good match."

It was an indisputable fact. Every man in our circles who wanted Ines would be stupid not to consider the positive effect a marriage would have on his future.

“Of course, that too. My family wants a union with your family. But since I danced with Ines a few months ago, I knew I wanted her as my wife.” Pietro grabbed my arm, forcing me to meet his gaze. The honest concern in his eyes surprised me. It wasn’t love. He didn’t know Ines well enough for that, but he obviously cared about her. “Dante, you and I know what kind of man Jacopo is.”

Everyone knew what kind of man Jacopo was. He got off on torture. I, too, occasionally appreciated the power rush it gave, especially if I dealt with traitors or enemies, but Jacopo enjoyed it on a sexual level, which didn’t bode well in a marriage.

I inclined my head, trying to suppress the rage flooding my body.

“How can you be this calm? How can you not be raging?”

I almost smiled. My fury was bottled up deep inside where it would remain until I chose to unleash it. It had taken years to perfect my emotionless mask, now it was as impenetrable as steel. “My father is the Boss. You know it’s his decision, not mine.”

Pietro’s eyes were fierce. “But you disapprove of it.”

Of course I did. How could I not? “Ines is my sister,” I said merely. I wouldn’t say more in public, even if I liked Pietro.

“Can you stand by and watch her being given to a monster?”

“Jacopo is cocky and arrogant. It might get him killed eventually.”

Pietro ordered another drink for himself while I still twisted my first in my hands. I’d never enjoyed getting drunk. The loss of control and inhibitions abhorred me deeply.

“Eventually could be too late for Ines.”

I emptied my whiskey. “They won’t marry until next summer…”

“Next summer? She’s only seventeen then. Won’t they wait until she’s of age?”

The barkeeper held up the bottle but I shook my head. I didn’t want to get a buzz. “One year is a long time, Pietro.” I met his gaze.

He searched my eyes, trying to make sense of my words. I wouldn’t get more explicit than that.

“You can trust me. I can help.”

I gave him a cold smile, not saying anything. I wouldn’t spill my guts to him, or share more than I already had. Pietro was one of the few men I trusted to some extent but definitely not enough to tell him more than was absolutely necessary. “I don’t need your help.”



Rocco and Jacopo waited beside the car when Enzo and I arrived. Jacopo smiled broadly, his head even higher and his chest puffed up. I gave him and his brother a sharp nod. If I uttered a word now, it wouldn't be anywhere close to the sophisticated cold I was famous for. Enzo shook their hands but from the way his mouth thinned when he touched Jacopo it was obvious what he thought of him. Few people liked Jacopo. I didn't trust any of them.

Without a word, I slipped into the backseat. Enzo took the steering wheel as usual.

"You're in the back, Squirt," Jacopo said to Rocco whose ears turned red. In the past, his entire face had turned the same color but he'd learned to school his features over the years.

Rocco sank down beside me, silent but glaring daggers at the back of his brother's head. Their animosity went beyond sibling rivalry. It was pure, undiluted hatred.

"Why do you still call him by that name?" Enzo asked in his low rumble as he started the car.

"Didn't I tell you the story?"

"You told it to everyone repeatedly," Rocco said quietly.

I gritted my teeth. "Indeed."

Jacopo threw his brother and me a cruel smile through the rearview mirror. "It is too good a story to forget."

I hadn't been present when the name was born. But the story still made the rounds, mostly due to Jacopo bringing it up as soon as it died down. Rocco had been fourteen when Jacopo and his similarly depraved friends had taken him to a

whorehouse for the first time. Apparently, Jacopo ordered two dancers to give Rocco very intense lap dances, which made him come in his pants. Naturally, that wasn't the end of Rocco's humiliation. Jacopo and his friends then forced Rocco to undress, to wipe his cum on a cracker and eat it. They probably would have found more ways to torture him if Giovanni Aresco, our Underboss here in Chicago, hadn't intervened.

"We have a task to focus on and don't have time to dwell in the past," I clipped, ensuring silence in the remaining ride to our target.

Enzo parked a block away from the fabric building and went scouting the area with Rocco. My father disapproved of me taking part in attacks but I insisted. Still, I was rarely allowed to be at the forefront.

The moment Jacopo and I were alone, leaning against the car, he let out a sigh and smiled in a way that suggested he didn't know why humans used the gesture but he'd adopted it. "Your father made me wait for a long time. Even my brother is already married, and I had to wait years for your sister. But she'll make it worthwhile for me, I'm sure." The smile turned darker, leering.

Rage boiled over, past my ironclad defenses. I rammed my elbow into his throat. My knife was right under my jacket. A jab was all it would take to save Ines from a cruel fate—a fate no woman deserved.

Challenge and fear flickered in Jacopo's eyes. "You want to kill me because of a cunt?"

I tightened my hold. One slash and his blood would coat my hands. It would feel good, better than any kill before him. “Careful,” I said quietly. “This cunt is my sister, and you’d do well to remember that I will be your Capo in a few years. Show respect.”

“And I’ll be your Consigliere. It’s always been that way. Our fathers are friends. You can’t kill me.”

It was true. As long as my father lived, I couldn’t kill Jacopo, and even then it would be difficult to explain to my men. Scuderi was a name that carried power, that belonged to the Outfit. They were loyal. A good reason was necessary to dispose of one of them, and protecting my sister from marital rape and torture wouldn’t be considered one. The mere idea that Ines would have to suffer under Jacopo’s sadism made my blood boil.

I released him. All my life I’d worked to become Capo, to follow in my father’s footsteps. I was meant to rule over the Outfit, and I would. Nothing would stop my rise in power, least of all Jacopo Scuderi. I stepped back with a cold smile. “I won’t kill you, you are right.”

His smile turned more triumphant, certain in his inherited immunity. Steps rang out when Rocco and Enzo turned the corner, done scouting the area.

“All clear?” I asked.

They nodded, and I gave the sign to attack. As expected, we found six Bratva soldiers inside the fabric building, guarding their last drug delivery. We split up into pairs of two as we tried to eliminate our opponents as quickly and

effectively as possible. Jacopo and I ended up in a smaller storage hall with three of the higher ranking Bratva soldiers, while Rocco and Enzo were busy dealing with the rest in the main storage.

When I'd struck down the first opponent, I advanced into the room and ducked behind a crate close to my next opponent. Jacopo stayed closer to the door, off to the left and dealt with enemy number three.

I could tell that my opponent was getting impatient and nervous. His aim was off and he kept raising his head to look toward the door for a way to escape. Would he really risk a dash for freedom? It was futile.

I aimed calmly, my arm steady as I waited for his next mistake. He finally raised his head again and I sent a bullet through the Bratva bastard's head, sending his brain flying everywhere. He tumbled sideways to the ground, dropping his gun, a Russian model.

Jacopo was still in a shooting match with his opponent. My eyes were drawn to the Bratva gun. I tugged one of my leather gloves out of my jacket and slipped it on before I picked up the discarded gun. Then I raised my own Barretta and shot the last Bratva man with it. Jacopo whirled around with a triumphant grin, which died when he saw me pointing the Russian gun at him. "A marriage to you won't be my sister's fate."

He jerked up his gun at the same time as I pulled the trigger. The bullet tore through his left eye, throwing his head back. His body fell backward. For a moment silence

reigned around me, an eerie nothingness that resonated in my ears.

Betrayal.

I'd killed an Outfit soldier. A man who was loyal to the cause, to my father, to the Outfit.

A sharp intake of breath made my eyes dart toward the door, where Rocco Scuderi stood. One look at his expression and I knew he'd witnessed my murder of his brother. For several moments neither of us moved. I was still pointing the Russian gun at the place where Jacopo's head had been.

Rocco's face morphed from shock to… relief.

Rocco looked *relieved*, no, ecstatic to see his older brother dead. There had been no love between the two but this unguarded show of joy came as a surprise. I pointed my gun straight at Rocco's skull but he hardly seemed to care. With wide eyes, he walked closer to his dead brother, a disturbing smile on his face. He spit on the corpse then kicked it hard several times.

I lowered my gun slowly, narrowing my eyes at the display of emotionality.

"See! See! You got what you deserve!" he raged, his head red and perspiring. "You got it!"

Breathing harshly, he turned around to me. My gun was leveled at his chest by now, as I was trying to decide if I could risk killing him as well. Rocco Scuderi wasn't a good man, but he was as loyal as his brother, maybe even more so, and he didn't share his brother's sadism, at least he hadn't openly displayed it until now.

Rocco’s gaze dropped to the gun in my hand, the Russian model that had ended his brother’s life, realizing it could end his as well. “I won’t tell anyone,” he said.

I moved closer to him, stepping over the dead Russian in the process. I didn’t take my eyes off Rocco. “You won’t?” I asked coldly. “Honor dictates that you tell your father the truth about who killed his heir, your vow binds you to reveal any betrayal of the Outfit to your Capo, my father.”

Rocco grimaced, his eyes shining with hatred. “For as long as I can remember, I wanted him dead. I would have killed him myself…” He shook his head. “I’m grateful that you did it. I’ll forever be grateful, Dante. I’ll take the secret to the grave with me, I swear it.”

“Why?” I stopped a few steps from him, the gun still trained on his heart.

“Because you gave me everything I ever wanted. Jacopo is dead, and I’ll be Consigliere.”

I tilted my head. “True. You’ll take over for your father eventually.”

Rocco frowned. “If he allows it. Jacopo was his favorite child.”

Jacopo’s brain decorated the bare concrete floor. “I can’t trust anyone with a secret of that proportion, you certainly understand.”

Rocco’s gaze became frantic. I could practically see his thoughts racing in his head. He took a step closer and I raised my gun higher. “Dante, I’m going to give my father poison, something that’s difficult to detect unless you’re

looking for it specifically. Something that'll make his end look like a heart attack. He's had one before and it's only natural for him to suffer another one after his heir, his *favorite child* is cruelly killed by a Bratva bastard. You'll convince your father that I was devastated and that my father's death was a natural cause and I'll convince everyone the enemy killed my brother. That way I'm not the only one guarding a secret."

Rocco had the potential to be a useful Consigliere, more so than Jacopo could ever have been. His father was only marginally better than Jacopo and too strongly entwined with my father. If I wanted a gradual power shift, I'd have to change the key players now. Killing Rocco would raise suspicions and leave me with Scuderi Senior to deal with for a decade or longer. I needed to diminish my father's power now, in subtle but effective ways. "Wait a week or two. Let him die after the funeral."

Rocco nodded, relief blatant on his face. "Thank you, Dante. You won't regret it. I'll be a loyal Consigliere, if you want me."

"You'll be Consigliere when I claim power, that's my promise to you." I paused. "But if you ever mention this event again, I'll finish what I didn't today. You'll take this secret to your grave either way."

"Nobody will find out from me." Rocco regarded me with admiration and respect. I couldn't detect deceit in his demeanor. I lowered the gun and put it back down beside the Russian.

“You need to move him to the side a bit so the angle is right,” Rocco said.

He was right. I dragged the Russian to the left then shoved my glove back into my pocket. Rocco gave a satisfied nod.

Enzo stormed inside, looking disheveled. His eyes landed on Jacopo. “Fuck. The fuckers got him?”

I nodded. “He was struck by a Russian bullet. We will have to avenge him. The Bratva needs to pay with blood,” I said firmly.

Rocco smiled grimly. “They will for killing my brother.”

A shared lie. I didn’t trust Rocco, but I trusted in his hatred for his brother and his eagerness to become Consigliere. Both would ensure his silence… for the time being.

One betrayal was always followed by another. It would take years for me to realize it.



After a late-night meeting with my father, the old Scuderi, and our Captains, I finally headed up to my room. I wasn’t sure if Father really believed that Jacopo had been shot so shortly after I’d found out he was to marry Ines. I had a feeling he knew of my betrayal but chose to ignore it. Or maybe he’d hold it over my head later. I wasn’t sure of his motives. He had only one heir, me, and he and Mother were

too old for another child. He was bound to me like I was bound to him if I wanted to keep the respect of the Outfit. Patricide was something that wouldn't be accepted in our traditional circles.

On my way to my bedroom, I stopped in front of Ines' door. I rapped my knuckles against the wood.

"Dante?"

"Yes," I answered.

"Come in."

I pushed the door open, slipped in and closed it. Ines stood in front of her window, already dressed for bed in a long nightgown, her long blonde hair trailing down her back. Jacopo's disgusting words of what he'd do to her flashed through my mind, followed by the grim satisfaction that he would never touch an inch of my sister.

"I wanted to tell you…" I said but trailed off when Ines turned around to me. She knew Jacopo was dead. The utter relief shone on her face. "You aren't supposed to listen in on meetings, Ines. Father will punish you."

Father expected me to punish her as well, but I wouldn't do it. I wouldn't hit her, or hurt her in some other way. He'd never tortured her as he had me, but he hit her and treated her like she was less. My refusal to do the same infuriated him.

Ines rushed toward me and flung herself into my arms, hugging me tightly. "I'm so happy, so happy he's dead. It's horrid of me to be happy about something like that, but I am. I could dance from joy. I prayed every day since I found

out about the marriage that he'd die, and now my wish came true. I know it was you. I know you killed him so he couldn't hurt me."

"Ines," I hissed in warning. "What are you talking about?"

She raised her blue eyes filled with gratefulness. "I know it was you. Don't lie to me. I know you did it to save me from him."

I didn't say anything because Ines knew me too well. No matter what I said, it wouldn't change her mind.

"Thank you for saving me. Thank you, Dante. Thank you, thank you, thank you." Tears filled her eyes again, and my chest tightened. She rested her forehead against my chest, releasing a shuddering breath. "Thank you for killing him."

"Ines," I rasped. "Shhh. Nobody must know. Jacopo was killed by the Bratva, all right?"

She pulled back, smiling softly. "Carla is so lucky to become your wife. If she knew how honorable you are, she would stop worrying so much."

My brows drew together. "Carla's worried about marrying me?"

Ines and Carla had been friends for as long as I could remember, which was why I knew Carla despite her low status as only second daughter of a Captain—according to my father. The knowledge that they talked about me behind my back didn't sit well with me. I hadn't started noticing Carla until a year ago when I'd taken her home after she'd visited our home. It was inappropriate but Ines hadn't felt

well enough to join us. The thirty-minute drive during rush hour had forced us to talk and her soft lullaby voice as she talked to me about mundane things like stitching or cooking had given me a feeling of calm. While calm always reflected on my outside, true calm on the inside had eluded me. I'd started paying closer attention to her. She was beautiful but very shy about it, naturally submissive, kind and religious, almost pious. She was good in a way I strived to be every morning when I swore not to become like my father and yet failed to be already at breakfast when I entertained thoughts of how to remove the old man without losing the Outfit's respect. If anyone could bring out whatever good there was in me, then it was someone like Carla.

Ines smiled. "You are hard to read, and quite frankly scary for people who don't know you, so… everyone except for me."

"She agreed to marry me."

"Her father agreed, and any Captain would be insane not to agree if he could marry his daughter off to the future Boss of the Outfit."

I stiffened. "If Carla doesn't want me—"

"I didn't say that."

"Then what is it you're saying, Ines? Tell me."

She lowered her arms, her smile falling. "Don't—" She swallowed. "Don't sound like him. You scare me when you do."

I released a low breath and touched her arm lightly. "You don't have any reason to be scared of me and neither does

Carla. But I need to know if she doesn’t want to marry me, if she isn’t attracted to me.”

Ines shook her head. “Of course, Carla wants to marry you. Almost all the girls are attracted to you, even if you act like you don’t notice. Your aloofness is driving them crazy. You should hear the speculations making the rounds. It’s cringe worthy. Even Carla sometimes falls trap to them.”

“What rumors?”

Ines bit her lip. “I’d rather not say.”

“Ines,” I said firmly.

“Honestly,” Ines said, flushing. “I’d rather not say.”

“I need to know the rumors making the rounds about me, especially if Carla buys into them.”

Ines looked away. “It’s making the rounds that you’re so obsessed with work and so untouched by human emotion that you don’t require any kind of physical closeness, which is why some people believe you’re…” Ines cringed.

I raised my eyebrows.

“…you’re a virgin. Carla actually asked me if you’re saving yourself for marriage.”

I stared at my sister. Her cheeks were red. She covered her mouth with her palm and laughed, eyes crinkling with amusement. Her shoulders shook. “Sorry.”

This was very typical for our society, especially for our women. They tried to spin stories around me to make me out to be some kind of dream-worthy hero when I was anything but.

“I know you’re not, which is what I told Carla—”

“You know?” I tilted my head, narrowing my eyes. While I wasn’t entirely comfortable discussing my sexuality with my sister, her certainty intrigued me.

She blinked, lowering her hand. “You are?” Her shock made the corner of my mouth twitch. I only looked at her and slowly her face morphed to confusion. “You’re toying with me.”

I was, but it was good to see the weight of the last few days fall off her.

She shook her head. “You can’t be. Why would you be? If I could choose the person and even enjoy it like men do, then I wouldn’t wait either.” Her eyes widened. “I’ll wait of course. You know I will. It’s not like it’s something I’m looking forward to.”

She grimaced and turned her back to me. “I’m sorry. You should go now.”

I touched her shoulder. “Ines, calm down. I understand. You don’t have to fear my reaction. I’m not Father.”

She nodded slowly and peered up.

I felt compelled to give her a bit of the truth. “You are right, I’m not saving myself for marriage. Even if I wanted to, it wouldn’t be allowed in our circles. My first experience wasn’t by my choice nor did I enjoy it. As is habit, our father like every father in the Outfit takes his son to a whorehouse and pays for his first woman. I was very young, and would have preferred choosing a woman for myself.”

Ines turned to me slowly, her face shifting to compassion.

“Don’t feel sorry for me. You are right, as a man, I have the chance to enjoy myself before marriage, but marriage doesn’t mean you won’t enjoy yourself too. Pietro is a good man.”

“Dante!” Ines cried and pointed at the door. “Now you really must leave.”

I walked out and she followed, her fingers gripping the edge of the door tightly as she closed it until only a sliver of her face peeked out. “Will Father allow me to marry Pietro?”

“Do you want to marry Pietro?”

“He’s good looking.” She swallowed. “He’s a good man?”

He was a Made Man. “He’ll be good to you.”

“Then I want to marry him.”

I nodded. “You will.”



After breakfast, I went into Father’s office. Mother was there as well. She wrung her hands. “People consider it bad luck.”

“What do they consider bad luck?” I asked as I stepped in.

“That Jacopo died so soon after your father agreed to give Ines to him. She could be cursed.”

Mother’s superstition astonished me, even after all this time.

Father’s eyes pierced me. “A curse requires a higher power having a hand in Jacopo’s end, but it wasn’t God who

struck him down, right, Dante?”

“Right. The Bratva isn’t any more heaven-sent than we are.”

Father’s smile was stiff, his eyes reptile-like in their scrutiny of me.

“I worry—” Mother began.

“Worry about clothes and stitching, not about things beyond your understanding,” Father said.

Mother nodded and scurried away.

“Pietro asked for Ines’ hand twice. Even this ridiculous curse rumor won’t dissuade him.”

“I have other offers I need to take into consideration as well.”

I stepped close to the desk. Maybe he was trying to punish me through Ines once more. I’d not allow it. “Say yes to Pietro.”

His eyes flashed with anger. “Careful.”

“A king without an heir reigns over a kingdom doomed to fall. I’m willing to risk the plunge. Are you?”

It was the only threat I’d utter. Father held my gaze, trying to gauge my seriousness then he smiled stiffly. “Pietro is the best choice on the table anyway. Why don’t you tell him the good news? He can have Ines next year. We’d set the wedding date for August.”

“Father, Ines will be only seventeen then.”

“And marriage age and age of consent are sixteen in Minnesota where she’ll live with Pietro. I expect him to move

to Minneapolis and prepare to take over from his father in the next couple of years."

"Do you expect me to take over as Capo soon after my wedding to Carla as well?" Of course, I knew the answer. My pleasant question was meant to provoke.

"Being the *Boss* of the Outfit is quite a different matter."

Father thought it would draw less negative attention to him if he was referred to as Boss, not Capo, as if anyone was fooled by the false packaging. I gave a curt nod. "I'll meet with Pietro now."

I didn't wait for his dismissal and left. On my way to my car, I sent Pietro a short text asking him to meet me in fifteen minutes at the bar in the Bologna, the casino he managed at the moment. When I entered the place, which had an annoying lava lamp theme, Pietro already perched on a stool. I headed for him and sat down beside him. He turned. Today his hair was immaculate and his clothes perfectly ironed. "I heard Jacopo was killed by a Bratva bullet yesterday."

A Bratva bullet, not a Bratva soldier. "It was unfortunate."

Pietro smiled. I motioned for the barkeeper to give me an espresso like Pietro.

"Father agreed to give Ines to you."

Pietro's expression brightened. "He does?"

"Next year, August."

Pietro froze. "I'd prefer to marry her the year after when she's eighteen, Dante."

“My father insists on the date, and that you move to Minneapolis right after the wedding and prepare to become Underboss.”

Pietro looked away, running a hand through his hair. “I don’t feel comfortable being married to Ines when she’s only seventeen.”

“I assume because of the sexual aspect of your marriage,” I said in a low voice, even if I bristled at the idea of it.

Pietro gave me a pained look.

“We don’t have the bloody sheets tradition anymore. You can wait the ten months until Ines’ birthday. Marriage doesn’t mean you have to have sex.”

Pietro stared down at the bar. “Dante,” he said quietly, but the doubt rang loud in that one word. He raised his head.

I wasn’t blind. Ines was a very beautiful woman. Her blonde hair and blue eyes were desired by many men, and her tall frame added to her appeal. Pietro would be as good a husband as a man of his or my disposition could be. He was also a man—a man who’d have the right to a very beautiful woman he’d share a house and bed with.

“I’d never force Ines, you know that.”

“Ines has been brought up to be dutiful and her duty is to give her body to you. Force won’t be necessary, Pietro. You know that as well as I do.” My voice had become sharper.

“I don’t know if… if I’m strong enough to resist that long.” He searched my eyes. “Could you resist for months if

your beautiful wife shared a bed with you every night?”

I prided myself on my self-control. Was I absolutely sure I could resist? No, but I wouldn’t reveal that to Pietro. “Yes.”

Pietro shook his head with a chuckle. “Then you’re a stronger man than me.”



Their wedding took place next year in August as Father insisted.

I kept an eye on Ines and Pietro at the wedding, trying to read their interactions to gauge how forceful my warning for Pietro would have to be. My eyes drifted to Carla who stood by herself, clinging to a glass of water. Her parents were dancing. I made a beeline for her. She spotted me and quickly averted her eyes in the demure way she had. I held out my hand. “Would you dance with me?”

“Of course.”

We danced for a while in silence before I bridged the subject that had been bothering me. “Are you sure you want to marry me?”

Her eyes grew wide. “Absolutely. We marry in three months… do we?”

I inclined my head. It had taken considerable effort to convince Father to have the wedding the same year as Ines’ but I didn’t want to wait. Carla’s parents were very

conservative and she had already turned eighteen several months ago. “You seemed reluctant.”

“I’m not, honestly. I’m only keeping my distance considering we’re not married yet.” She gave me her first honest smile of the day.

“Three months.”

She smiled a bit wider, blushing, and nodded, and as usual, a sense of calm flooded me in her presence. After my dance with Carla, I headed toward my brother-in-law to deal with the second matter on my list.

Pietro laughed at something Rocco said. Since the old Scuderi’s death and Rocco had taken over as Consigliere his demeanor had changed. Now nobody called him Squirt anymore. Freed of his father and brother, he showed that he was a Scuderi through and through, not as depraved as them but cunning and brutal. A good Consigliere, one who was loyal to me, not my father.

“I’d like to have a word with you.”

Pietro nodded and followed me to a secluded area.

“You remember a year ago you told me Jacopo was a monster and that Ines shouldn’t be given to him.”

Pietro watched Ines talk to Carla before he turned back to me, brows pulling together. “Of course. I’m glad he got killed.”

“I hope you’ll prove tonight and every day that follows that you are a better man than Jacopo, that you deserve my sister,” I said quietly, stepping closer to him.

Pietro held my gaze. “If I don’t, will the Bratva give me an early end as well?”

“I hope it won’t come to it.”

“It won’t. And not because I fear the consequences.” His expression was hard. “If you’ll excuse me, I need to talk to *my wife*.”



I was tense, had been all night and all morning. Pietro and Ines finally stepped in and applause sounded. I didn’t join in. Pietro had his arm wrapped possessively around Ines’ waist, but Ines was leaning into him, seeking his closeness and protection as the force of everyone’s attention hit her. She held her head high despite the slight blush on her cheeks. She peered up at Pietro without a hint of fear and he returned her gaze with adoration. When he noticed my attention, his expression smoothed, turned into blank calm. He gave me a curt nod, and I returned it because one look at my sister told me he’d treated her the way she deserved it. Maybe betraying the Outfit for my sister would eventually come with a price, but I was willing to pay it.

Ines—the first woman I betrayed the Outfit for.

It was only the beginning.

THE SECOND BETRAYAL

12 years later

Dante

I held Carla's hand, pressed my lips against her knuckles. Her skin was ashen, her breathing labored, pained… I raised my eyes, found her watching me with tired, sad eyes. "I'm sorry I could never give you children."

I shook my head, touched her cheek and pressed a kiss to her dry lips. "Carla, nothing of this matters."

"This is all a part of God's plan, my love."

I didn't say anything. In all the years, Carla's faith had never rubbed off on me, no matter how hard she'd tried. I wasn't a believer, now less than ever. If there was a God and this was his plan, I'd never forgive him.

"Don't… don't be angry. Don't let it consume you."

I'd have given her the world. But this wasn't something I could promise. Anger was already boiling in my chest, waiting to spill forth.

"Will you pray with me?"

I cupped her hands, nodding and lowered my head. Carla's whispered prayers bounced off my rising despair. Carla was everything good in my life. She contrasted me. Without her… what would I become?



The morphine wasn't strong enough to make Carla's waking hours bearable—unless the doctors gave her so much that her state was almost comatose.

I held her hand as she whimpered, her face sunken in completely. Few of my enemies had suffered under my torture as much as Carla did in the last days of her life. It wasn't fair. Nothing could make me believe otherwise.

"I know suicide is sin, but I want this to be over. I just want it to stop." She swallowed. "I can't… take anymore."

I froze. I'd known it was only a matter of time before we'd have to say goodbye, but Carla's words threw the stark reality of it into my face.

I kissed her hand. "It's not really suicide if death comes through my hand, my love."

"Dante—"

"I've done worse." That was a lie. This would break the last human part in me, but if anyone was worth that sacrifice, it was Carla.

"Are you sure?" In the past she would have argued with me, recited Bible passages, appealed to the good in me.

That she didn’t even try showed how bad it was.

I nodded.

“You can shoot me. That’s quick and easy for you.”

Nothing about this would be easy. And I’d never disgrace Carla by killing her like I would a goddamn traitor. “Don’t worry about it. Tomorrow everything will be over and you’ll be at a better place.”

I didn’t believe in Heaven or Hell. If there was, our goodbye would be eternal.



That evening was the last I spent with Carla.

When I stepped up to the bed, Carla smiled weakly. She knew what I was about to do and relief shone in her eyes. I hadn’t discussed the details with her. She’d always preferred to stay in the dark regarding the brutal sides of life. I reached into my pant pocket and pulled out the syringe with the insulin. I lay down on the bed beside Carla and stroked a few strands of her soft hair. Streaks of gray mingled in it, like the wrinkles around her eyes and mouth, they were marks of her battle against this demonic sickness. A battle she’d lost. “It’s okay,” she whispered. “You’ll find new happiness.”

I didn’t say anything because every word would have either made Carla sad or been a lie.

With shaking hands, I prepared the syringe. Hands that were always steady no matter what happened. Not now. “I

love you, Dante.”

I swallowed. “And I love you, *will always* only love you, Carla.”

She squeezed my hand with sad eyes then gave a small nod.

Looking into her eyes, I pushed the syringe into her arm. Before I injected her, I cradled her in my arms and kissed her once more. Seconds after the injection, Carla lost consciousness and as I held her in my arms, her breathing stopped.

I kept holding her even as she became cold, even as the silence in the room echoed loudly in my head. Night fell outside and then it became light again, and I still cradled her in my arms. Steps sounded in the house. Slowly, I slid my arm out from under her body and put her head down on the pillow. After I pulled out the syringe and thrust it into the bin, I kissed her eyelids and stood.

I couldn’t look away from her lifeless body, even though the sight of it crushed my heart.

“Master?” Zita called, and for a moment I considered sending her away so I could be alone with Carla’s body and my sorrow, but I couldn’t hide like this forever. I couldn’t do what I wanted—lay down beside my wife again and wait for death to claim me as well. Life needed to go on. I wasn’t sure how it could though.



Ines squeezed my hand under the table as she kept on her conversation with Mother. I didn’t react to her attempt at consoling me, instead I excused myself and headed for the gardens, needing to get away from all the people who pretended they cared about Carla’s death when all they wanted was to get into my good graces, knowing it was only a matter of time before I’d take over as the Boss officially from my father as well.

I couldn’t remember the last time I’d been this angry but without an outlet to release my emotions. Carla’s death had been like a cluster bomb and since then my insides felt frayed, torn, irrevocably damaged. My sorrow hadn’t diminished, if possible it had grown in the days since I’d killed her and with it my fury, my need to share this agony the only way I could, by inflicting it on others.

Steps raised my protective walls but I didn’t have to mask my face into one of calm, it always was. My muscles seemed perfectly frozen even as my insides burnt with emotions that threatened to unravel me and with it possibly the Outfit.

Pietro stopped beside me, not saying a word and stared up at the night sky like I did. After a couple of minutes, he slanted me a look. “We’ll stay for a week. Your mother is happy to have the twins around and Ines thought it would do you good to have family close by.”

I gave a terse nod.

“Dante,” Pietro said quietly, angling his body toward me and I knew his words wouldn’t do what they were intended

to do even before he spoke them. “If you need someone to talk, you know you can come to me. You don’t have to bear this loss by yourself.”

One hand curled to a fist at my side, I nodded again, and Pietro finally retreated.

The night sky seemed endless and foreboding tonight. I wanted to believe Carla was up there somewhere, looking down at me. Maybe it would have offered me a flicker of consolation if I believed in an existence after death. I didn’t, and consolation was unreachable. The images of Carla’s lifeless body, of her casket being lowered into the dank soil slithered through my mind like poisonous snakes.



Two days later, my parents invited the Scuderis over for dinner and despite my need to be alone, I attended the gathering. There was no one at home waiting for me and my duty to the Outfit bound me to be present. It wouldn’t do good to appear weak, not so shortly before my rise to become Capo.

Ines, Pietro, and the twins were there as well. The Scuderi sisters were too old to play with them but Fabiano was only a year older and so he joined Serafina and Samuel in a corner of the room after dinner to play. I barely listened to the conversation, even if it was about the Famiglia and how to assure peace with them.

“A marriage would bind us. Salvatore is eager to find a beautiful bride for his son Luca,” Father said.

“He’s interested in Aria,” Rocco said. “An immediate wedding preferably.”

My gaze turned to the girl who was chatting with her sisters on the sofa. She was fifteen, too young for marriage and too innocent for someone of Vitiello’s disposition.

“That man killed his cousin with his bare hands. I’m not sure if a union between him and one of our girls can be the foundation of peace,” Ines said.

Father’s brows tightened with disapproval, and Mother made a small shush noise toward Ines. “Your opinion isn’t appreciated at this table, Ines. You better concern yourself with how to please your husband and control your children, especially your daughter, she needs to learn her place.”

Serafina was brawling with the boys, holding her own despite her angelic appearance.

In the past, Ines would have ducked her head but as Pietro’s wife, she only had to obey him, not Father, and Pietro didn’t appear annoyed by her speaking up.

“I’ll teach my daughter her place, don’t worry.” Ines had mastered the art of subtle defiance and polite criticism, and so she smiled even though her eyes reflected the same aversion I felt toward our father.

Father’s mouth pinched and he looked at me as if he waited for me to rebuke Ines. He knew my sister valued my opinion more than his. I lifted my glass and took a sip of my wine, not in the slightest interested to get involved in this,

not today, not when my mind kept replaying Carla's last smile, her last breath, the moment her fingers went slack in mine.

"There's of course something to consider before we decide to give Aria to Luca." Father's smile was reptile-like, and my muscles tightened in preparation for his next words. "Aria could give the Outfit beautiful blond children. You need a new wife and an heir."

Despite my best intentions, the words hit me like a sledgehammer. After so many years, Father had finally found something to cut me once more. Keeping my face neutral was an agonizing struggle.

"Carla's funeral was only two days ago!" Ines hissed, glancing toward me in blatant concern. "Don't you have an ounce of respect for her memory and for Dante's sorrow?"

"You'd do well to respect the man who decides over life and death in this territory," Father said.

Pietro grabbed Ines' hand and from the look in his eyes, I knew he was about to say something that would get him in trouble with my father, and while Father would hesitate before disposing of an Underboss, he would never dispose of me because he wanted his blood to live on and I was his only option. I stood and thrust my palm down on the table, letting my anger out and balling my sadness into a tight knot inside of me. "This conversation isn't happening."

Even the kids fell silent as they watched me open-mouthed.

I stepped back and stalked out of the room, seething, and continued toward the front door, needing fresh air. Father wouldn’t give up that easily.



My suspicion proved correct when Father and I were invited over to the Scuderi mansion a few days later to discuss the newest developments of a possible union with the Famiglia.

Father had talked to Salvatore Vitiello several times in the last few days while I’d stepped back to gather myself. My mental state wouldn’t do us any favors in business negotiations at the time being. Luca and Salvatore could smell weakness from miles away.

“I sent Salvatore photos of Aria and Gianna,” Father said. “He’d accept either of them but he prefers Aria.”

Rocco shook his head. “Gianna’s too boisterous. He’ll beat her to death and then we’ll be left with the problem of how to react appropriately. She needs someone who knows how to control his impulses and break her without killing her. Luca isn’t that kind of man.”

His eyes slanted to me. I ignored the subtle suggestion. I wouldn’t marry Aria or Gianna. Those girls were thirteen and fifteen, mere children, and I was a man who only harbored darkness after Carla’s death.

“We have to make tactical choices that benefit the Outfit, son.”

I nodded. “That’s true. Giving Aria to Luca seems the wiser choice. I think she’ll be less likely to provoke him than Gianna.” Considering how I’d killed Jacopo to protect Ines from a monster, it was ironic how I agreed to give another innocent girl to a monster for the sake of the Outfit. Sacrifices needed to be made, it was Father’s credo. I knew there was only one way to save Aria from Luca’s clutches and that was if I wanted her for myself. Father and Rocco would readily agree. It would spare her the cruelty under Luca’s hand and it would get Father off my back, allow me to bury myself in my grief without constant surveillance. I could insist on a marriage in three years, and even if Father demanded a closer date, I knew Aria would be glad if I didn’t act like a husband, if I didn’t try to lay claim on her. My insides tightened at the mere idea of being with someone other than Carla, of making a vow of that proportion when Carla was the only woman I wanted to be bound to.

As if he could smell my train of thought, Rocco got up and walked toward the door, opening it. “Aria! Come down here for a moment.” Rocco returned to the table and exchanged a look with Father. I knew what they were thinking, what so many people in the Outfit were thinking.

The Golden Couple. The name carried in whispers through our circles, had started to do so even before Carla’s body had turned cold, had begun the moment word about her cancer had gotten out. I’d ignored it but it had grown to a dimension that made it impossible to keep doing so. I was left with two choices if I didn’t want to appear weak, because

grieving a dead woman was nothing but weakness in the eyes of so many of Father's loyal men. Either I married Aria, or I gave her to Luca.

Within a couple of minutes, she walked into the living room, dressed in a pale blue dress, her blonde hair up in a messy ponytail. Her eyes widened as she spotted us, too young to school her features quick enough. She came over, hands clasped in front of her belly, trepidation reflecting on her face. For a moment, her eyes met mine before she ducked her head and turned to Rocco. "Yes, Father?"

My eyes trailed over her, trying to imagine how I could be a husband to that girl. I couldn't possibly allow closeness in the physical, much less the emotional sense to her. The idea of sharing a bed with her, of pretending I could care about her, it stirred up my insides, until anger and sorrow were inseparable until my need to dish out the same pain that consumed me got overwhelming. Maybe Luca would break her with cruelty, but maybe he wouldn't. I didn't know.

What I knew without a doubt was that I would break her with my sorrow-tinged darkness, that I'd eventually vent my anger on her because she dared to take the spot at my side nobody deserved but the woman that I'd buried mere days ago.

"We want a drink. Head over to the cigar lounge and get glasses and the bottle of my favorite scotch for us."

She nodded quickly before she turned and walked off. I wouldn't marry Aria. I couldn't.

“She’s beautiful and young,” Father said to me.

“She is.” My voice didn’t reflect my inner turmoil. “Which is why we need to give her to Luca Vitiello. It’ll send him the message that we’re determined to give him the best we can offer. If peace is our intention, we don’t have a choice.”

Disappointment flickered across Father’s wrinkled face but he inclined his head. Rocco didn’t seem too sad either, after all, his daughter would be given to a future Capo either way. “There’s still Gianna.”

“Father,” I said firmly. “I won’t marry Gianna either, or anyone else. We have other things to focus on.”

He knew me well enough to realize I wouldn’t budge on the subject now that I had made up my mind. I didn’t want to marry again soon, or ever. The memory of Carla was my companion and the success of the Outfit my mission in life, there was no room for anything else.

I’d sworn to put the Outfit above all else, especially a woman, but here I was refusing a bond because of my love for Carla. Not marrying posed a risk in our circles. It suggested I was struggling with my late wife’s death and that was admittance of weakness above all else. If the Outfit appeared weak, our enemies might try to attack. Not to mention that I needed an heir, a boy who could become Capo when I retired or got killed.

Yet I couldn’t marry, not yet. Maybe never.

It was betrayal of my oath, but the vows to Carla meant more to me. They always would.

THE THIRD BETRAYAL

Three years later

PART 1

I regarded Aria as she huddled beside Luca. Despite the splendid white dress and her bright smile, it was obvious to me that her wedding wasn't a day of joy for her. It didn't come as a surprise, considering her husband. Luca's vigilant eyes kept returning to me, like a lion who smelled another predator in his territory.

He wasn't someone I would have tolerated in my vicinity under normal circumstances, but normal had become an even harder to grasp concept in these last three years.

Mother put her hand over mine. "Don't you think it's time for you to take it off?"

I released my wedding band, which I had been twisting around my finger, pulled my hand away and stood. “Excuse me, I think it’s expected of me to grace the dance floor with my presence.” My mother’s face reflected the same reproach her words had carried but guilt trips had long lost their impact on me.

But her interference was appreciated anyway. I needed to keep up appearances at a time like this and hanging on to the past publicly wasn’t something I could risk. Ines and Pietro had barely left the dance floor, one of the few couples who were as happy behind closed doors as they appeared on the outside, like Carla and I had been.

I shoved the thoughts aside and my eyes came to rest on Valentina once more. She stood off to the side, talking to Bibiana Bonello. I purposefully went over to her and her demeanor changed from relaxed to sophisticated tension the moment she noticed my approach. She’d lost her husband less than a year ago and her father had started looking for a new husband for her a couple of weeks ago. I held out my hand. “Would you like to dance?”

Surprise flickered in her green eyes but she accepted my invitation and let me lead her toward the dance floor. Silence stretched between us as we began to sway to the music, and I considered the woman in my arms. From the moment Valentina’s father Giovanni had started looking for a new husband for his daughter, an idea had started forming in my mind. Valentina had lost her husband recently, and would still be crippled by her own sorrow, which in turn

would make her reluctant to seek my closeness, at least emotional. As for the physical aspect of a possible bond, I had no trouble admitting that I was attracted to her, as were most of the men present tonight. Valentina was elegant and beautiful.

Moreover, she was experienced, which might make her undesirable in my parents' eyes but perfect for my purposes. A virgin bride required gentleness and care I didn't have to spare but Valentina might be up for the angry sex I craved if only to battle her own demons into silence.

"I'm sorry for your loss. I haven't told you personally so far."

Sadness flickered in her eyes. "Thank you. It means a lot coming from someone who understands what it means."

My chest constricted but my mask remained perfectly still.

"Not everyone comprehends that it takes time to overcome sorrow." Her eyes darted briefly to her father who talked to Rocco.

She was obviously unhappy about his attempts to remarry her so quickly, another fact that made her the perfect option. After the dance ended, my decision was made. I'd discuss a possible union with her father as soon as my own had agreed.



As expected, Father wasn’t excited about my choice. “She’s been married before, Dante. Do you really want a woman that’s been claimed by another man? In a few months, you’ll be Capo. You can have any girl you desire, why opt for second-hand ware?”

I stifled my annoyance and kept up my stern expression as I shoved my hands into my pockets. “It’s either her or no one. I don’t want a young girl at my side. Valentina is perfectly capable to give me what I need.”

Father sighed, his milky blue eyes trying to stare me down, but he’d grown old and the only thing that protected him from an early grave was the fact that I respected Mother and knew that many men looked up to my father despite his many faults.

“Talk to Giovanni. I’m sure he’ll jump at the chance to make the match.”

Without another word, I headed out of his office and continued out of my parents’ house toward my car as I sent Giovanni a message that I’d be coming over for a business matter.

I didn’t see Valentina or her mother anywhere when Giovanni led me into his office, obviously confused by my appearance. “Is something the matter, Dante? I’m confident that our men will keep Grigory’s soldiers in check.”

“That’s not why I’m here.” I accepted the drink he held out to me before I sank down on the sofa. Giovanni sat across from me, a flicker of unease in his eyes. Did he think I was here because I’d remove him from his position as

Underboss now that I'd become the Boss of the Outfit? After all, we were the only mob family where the Capo allowed an Underboss in his own city.

"Have you found a husband for your daughter yet?"

He lowered his glass with a look of confusion. "I have a couple of suitors who'd be willing to accept a widow. They are soldiers like Antonio but I hadn't really expected that I'd manage to find a better match for her. I should have never agreed to her marriage to Antonio in the first place, but I wanted to see her happy and now see where it's gotten us." He shook his head and opened the button of his jacket as he relaxed in the chair.

I nodded even if it didn't matter to me. "If she isn't promised to someone yet, I'd ask you to give me her hand in marriage."

Giovanni coughed as he choked on his scotch, his eyes watering. "Excuse me?"

"I'd like to marry your daughter, if that's agreeable for you."

Giovanni stared at me for so long, I wondered if he'd suffered a stroke, then he laughed. When I didn't fall in, he fell silent and he cleared his throat. "You're being serious."

"I am. I want to marry Valentina in January before I take over as Boss."

Giovanni sank back against the backrest, releasing a low breath as he ran a hand through his hair, looking seriously stunned. "I didn't expect that."

"I can see that."

“Does your father agree to you marrying someone who isn’t pure?”

My lips tightened. “I don’t ask for permission, Giovanni. You know as well as I do that I already rule over the Outfit. My word is law.”

Giovanni nodded, swirling his drink in its glass and shaking his head again. “Why my daughter, Dante?”

I hadn’t expected that question. “I thought you’d be happy about a union between Valentina and me.”

“Don’t get me wrong, I am, and Livia will undoubtedly be ecstatic to have you as her son-in-law, especially after all the trouble Orazio has been giving us,” he said quickly, but he didn’t look it. He took another sip, obviously weighing his next words. “But you have nothing to gain from a union like that.”

“I’ll gain a beautiful wife and a mother for my children.”

“There are dozens of girls in our territory that could give you the same thing with the added bonus of you being their first husband.”

“I’m not interested in having a teenage girl at my side, nor do I see an advantage of being with a virgin.”

Giovanni grimaced and something in his eyes changed. It was a subtle change but one I noticed because I’d learned to pay attention to the little details. He was a man who’d switched from asking as my Underboss to interrogating me as Valentina’s father. “You know me, Dante, I mind my own business, but in my position, I’d have to be deaf not to hear the occasional tidbit of gossip.” His eyes held mine. “I know

you used to frequent the Palermo. Tommaso and Raffaele are men who like to hear themselves talk, you know that."

"Say what you have to say," I said coldly, even though I had a feeling I knew where this was going.

"According to their words, and I quote 'you went there to fuck your anger out of your system'."

"How I spend my nights is my business and so are my sexual preferences."

"They are, unless you intend to use Val to get rid of your anger. She isn't a virgin, all right, but I won't have her abused because you think your conscience will give you less trouble with an experienced woman."

Giovanni was a loyal soldier, a good Underboss and a better man than I'd realized. Rocco like so many other men would have handed his daughters over to me no questions asked, but Giovanni wanted to protect Valentina and I respected him for it, which was why I'd cut him slack for the way he'd talked to me. "I don't have a conscience that could give me trouble," I bit out. "But I can assure you I won't abuse Valentina, virgin or not. You know my stance on domestic violence and rape, Giovanni. You were at my side when I tried to rule it over."

He tilted his head but his expression remained wary.

I considered what to tell him. He had been right that I wanted Valentina because I hoped she'd be willing to settle for a bond of convenience that extended to angry sex. I wasn't looking for closeness or love but a way to fulfill my duty to the Outfit. If this bond allowed me to fuck my anger

out of my system without using whores, that would be an added bonus but only if Valentina wanted the same. “I want your daughter as my wife because we’ve both lost someone and that’s a base we can build a mutually beneficial bond on.”

“That’s a reason I can accept, but I’m not sure if Val shares our views.”

“She seems like a woman who sees reason. I’m sure she’ll agree this is the best solution for both of us.”

“I’m sure she will,” he said slowly. There was a note to his voice I couldn’t place but it was irrelevant.

“Is it settled then?”

He raised his glass. “It is.”

We clinked glasses and downed our drinks then I left, having more pressing business to attend to now that the problem of my marriage was settled.



The wedding wasn’t as splendid as could be expected from a man in my position but it was bigger than I would have liked.

Valentina was a beautiful bride, elegant sophistication in her cream-colored dress. My attention should have been on her—*only her*—from the moment she set foot inside the church, even more so when she arrived at my side and her father handed her over to me.

And yet, I struggled to stay in the present, to not be taken back many years to another wedding ceremony, to another woman. The woman who still haunted my nights with her sorrow-filled eyes.

When it was time for our kiss, my insides tightened. I hadn't kissed a woman since Carla's death. It was too intimate a gesture, too emotional. But Valentina was my wife and everyone expected us to share a kiss.

I didn't show my conflict, didn't allow a moment of hesitation, as I lowered my mouth to Valentina's waiting lips. The reluctance I'd expected at this intimate contact didn't come, the guilt, however, crashed down on me like an avalanche. I pulled back, catching Valentina's searching expression, and turned to the guests. Valentina thought our marriage would allow her to pry behind my walls—she'd soon be disillusioned.



The wedding was a string of meaningless conversations, stilted smiles and congratulations I could hardly accept. Dancing was only marginally better.

I released Aria after our obligatory dance and she quickly returned to Luca's side while I left the dance floor to clear my head for a bit. Orazio stood off to the side by himself and I headed his way. He stood a bit straighter as he noticed my approach. "Dante," he said, his eyes wary. Our

relationship had always been distant, and I doubted it would change now.

“Have you and your father settled your dispute?”

“It can hardly be called a dispute. He told me his opinion and expects me to follow his command.”

I nodded. “Our world is dominated by old rules that can’t be overrun easily. Often it feels like there’s only duty and little choice.”

Orazio’s mouth tightened. “I know. Duty is a word I’m all too familiar with.”

I searched his eyes. “Giving up someone we care about is never easy, but a marriage of convenience can be mutually beneficial.” Even to my own ears the words sounded hollow. My eyes followed Matteo as he bowed in front of Valentina and pulled her close against him. Anger surged through me at his open lack of respect.

“Is that what Valentina is to you—convenient?”

I slanted Orazio a sharp look. “I won’t discuss my marriage with you. Nor will I get involved in your matters.”

Orazio looked away. “If you’d talk to my father, he may see reason.”

“I can’t get involved in family matters. Your father has always been a loyal man.”

Valentina’s laughter carried through the room.

My gaze found her as she smiled broadly over something Matteo must have said.

“Excuse me,” I told Orazio, who merely nodded, and made my way over to Valentina and Matteo. For some

unexplainable reason, it didn’t sit well with me that Valentina seemed completely at ease with Matteo. His charm was notorious.

“I think it’s my turn again,” I said as I reached them, my voice clipped.

Matteo’s mouth twitched. “Of course. Who could stay away from such dark beauty for long?” Then he kissed Valentina’s hand in a way that made my blood boil. The open provocation spoke to the dark fury that had lain dormant beneath a thin layer of control all day. Valentina gripped my hand before I could decide if killing Matteo would give me the necessary satisfaction to warrant war with the Famiglia. Aria was clever enough to drag Matteo away.

“I thought you wanted to dance with me?” Valentina’s words interrupted my thoughts.

I pulled her against me and began to lead her over the dance floor, even if the soft music didn’t compliment my pounding pulse.

“What did he say?” I asked.

“Hm?”

“What made you laugh?”

“He made a joke about bushes.”

A hint of embarrassment flickered across Valentina’s face.

“He should be more careful.”

“I think he’s a bit tense because of the problems between Gianna and him.”

“From what I hear, he’s always been volatile, even before his engagement to the Scuderi girl.”

“Not everyone is as controlled as you are.”

If she knew how little I wanted to control myself tonight, she wouldn’t have said that.



I was relieved when the celebrations afterward came to an end and Valentina and I sat in the quiet of my Mercedes on our way to my mansion. I couldn’t shake the feeling that I’d betrayed Carla today, my promise to her, our love, the memory that kept me from losing myself to the darkness completely, but I hoped that at least from the outside I looked composed, in control. But I was sick of being in control, tired of holding onto an appearance of cold when I wanted to rage and destroy.

Many months had passed since I’d last visited the Palermo, last released at least part of the pent-up fury. One would think that my life provided enough opportunity to relieve some tension and I had certainly made sure to take part in more attacks than in the previous years but it didn’t seem enough. Instead of calming the raging fury and sadness in my veins, every act of violence seemed to kindle a new, a hotter fire in my chest. Valentina slanted me a look, perhaps bothered by our lack of conversation but I couldn’t provide her with small talk, not right now.

I was trying to honor her as my wife but that required that I didn’t lose control and as it was my composure was hanging at a threat. All through the evening, I’d battled with myself. I was angry at the situation, at everything, even at Valentina, which was unreasonable since this marriage hadn’t even been her idea. I prided myself on my logical qualities but right now, emotions overruled all else and threatened to pull me and the image I’d built apart at the seams.

I tightened my hold on the steering wheel as I pulled the car up to the mansion that had been Carla’s and my home for almost twelve years, and would now become Valentina’s home too. Even that felt like a sacrilege. Valentina gave me another curious look, but I wouldn’t let her glimpse behind the mask. I led her into the house then up the stairs toward our bedroom.

My eyes found Valentina’s cleavage, her enticing curves. Maybe I could get rid of some of the tension coiling in my body. Ever since Matteo’s dance with her and the appreciative glances other men had thrown her way, I’d felt the depraved need to stake my claim. I’d never been the primal type, never acted on my base needs, but I had been a different man back then, or maybe not different, but my dark nature hadn’t been as in control. With Carla, I had been restrained, never felt the desire for angry sex with her. She had been the calm in my life, the one who spoke to the good in me, to a part of me I wished was more prominent but would never be.

I opened the door to the master bedroom and motioned for Valentina to go in, which she did with another searching look at me. My eyes followed the curve of her back to her ass that the dress accentuated in a very pleasing way as I stepped inside and closed the door. I'd moved into the bedroom days after Carla's death, unable to sleep in the room I'd spent almost every night with her. I shoved the memories aside, forced down the wave of emotions they evoked, and focused on a safer notion: my desire for my wife.

"The bathroom is through that door," I said, as I walked past her toward the window, stifling my desire to grab Valentina, throw her down on the bed and fuck her from behind. She was my wife, and deserved at least some semblance of control from me. That I desired her made me already feel guilty. The whores I'd sought in Palermo had been chosen based on their sexual specialties, not their appearance. I hadn't even given them more than a fleeting glance before I'd fucked them, but I had chosen Valentina, and even if I wanted to pretend it had been based solely on logic, I had to admit to myself that I'd found her desirable.

The soft click told me Valentina had disappeared in the bathroom. I braced myself against the window, staring out into the dark night, focusing on the way my groin tightened, on the desire stirring in my insides, on the dark hunger that screamed louder than sorrow and guilt.

When Valentina finally emerged, I was teetering on the edge. She cleared her throat, causing me to turn and take in

the sight of her, dressed in a violet nightgown that hugged her curves. It was elegant and more modest than I'd expected. When my gaze finally settled on her face, I knew I wouldn't find an outlet for my pent-up fury tonight, not because Valentina wouldn't answer to my demands but because I couldn't allow myself to act like that toward my wife, not when she looked at me with a hint of insecurity and shyness, and worse hope. Valentina may have lost a husband but she wanted me to take his place, to give her tenderness and love.

"You can lie down. I'll grab a shower." The words came out like an order but I didn't take them back as I headed into the bathroom and closed the door from Valentina's confused face.

I tore at my tie then thrust it to the ground before I removed my remaining clothes with the same violence. Only when I stepped inside the shower and released a long breath as the hot water poured down on me did I relax. I grabbed my cock, needing to get rid of the desire simmering under my skin. The woman waiting for me in our shared bed wanted something I couldn't give her and she wasn't ready yet to give me what I wanted. Soon she'd realize that this was a bond for outside appearances, no more. My release brought me little satisfaction, not that I'd expected it to, but when I returned to the bedroom fifteen minutes later, I felt more like myself, in control and calm. Valentina reclined on the bed, elegant, beautiful. My eyes took her in, could not stop, but again her expression reminded me why I had tried

to control myself in the first place. I stretched out beside her, even though her scent crawled into my nose, calling to the desire I'd tried to quench. I met Valentina's gaze as she stretched out beside me. She looked embarrassed and insecure, almost innocent, and it threw me off because I'd expected her to be different, because I'd married her in hopes that she'd be different.

"I have an early day tomorrow," I said, turning off the lights.

Valentina's even breathing sounded beside me and her scent still tantalized me, but in the dark, the past was stronger than my desire as memories resurfaced against the black canvas of the night. Carla's sunken face, her raspy last breath, the fear and despair in her eyes, and finally the relief when it all ended.

PART 2

I avoided my wife like a goddamn coward. I prided myself on my restraint but in her company, I was shown how wrong I'd been. Every new attempt from her to seduce me tore another chunk of my wall down.

Valentina didn't give up. Part of me wanted her to keep up her pursuit until I lost my battle, the other, still stronger

part, needed her to stop before I showed her why I'd avoided marriage for so long. Our first kiss awakened something in me I had trouble caging in, a hunger so unrestrained and wild, it threatened to awaken the parts of my nature that had no place in a marriage. And so I kept pushing her way. For my sake, but more than that: for her sake.



I stared into the dark fireplace. The last embers had died unlike the fiery anger inside of me. It was difficult to pinpoint the source of my anger. Most of it was directed at myself but a part was for the woman who didn't deserve it. Valentina.

I resented her for the desire she stirred in me. She made me feel unhinged in a way I was unfamiliar with. I'd never experienced this kind of sexual desire, this need to consume someone.

The sound of heels on hardwood floor attracted my attention but I didn't turn. Valentina hovered near the doorway, beautiful as always, a siren calling to my base instincts.

"Is it true that you frequented Club Palermo?"

My fingers around the whiskey glass tightened. I didn't want to discuss the past, and even less be reminded of my primal needs. "It belongs to the Outfit, but that was a long time before our marriage."

“So you didn’t mind the company of prostitutes, but you can’t take your own wife’s virginity?”

Shock blasted through my composure. I looked at Valentina. Virginity?

A desire so all-consuming it almost shredded my control took hold of me. With sheer force of will I reined it in.

Valentina fled the room.

With forced calm, I set the glass down and followed her, even if keeping my distance to my far too tempting wife was detrimental.

I found Valentina in the bedroom, staring out of the window. I approached her until I could see her tipped down face in the reflection.

“Virginity?” I asked, standing close behind Valentina who kept looking out of the window, trying to hide her face from me. “You and Antonio were married for four years.”

I thought of Valentina’s attempts to seduce me. She had appeared unpracticed and inexperienced but I had blamed it on her nerves about being with another man than her first husband. Now as I reflected on her actions more thoroughly, I realized that they could more likely be linked to her never having been with a man, but the question remained: why was she a virgin after having been married? “Valentina,” I said more firmly.

“I shouldn’t have said anything,” she whispered. “It was just a figure of speech. I didn’t mean it in the literal sense. As you said, Antonio and I were married for four years. Of course, I’m not a virgin.”

She was lying. I had no trouble detecting the lie and it raised my anger. Few people dared lying to me and they all paid a harsh price for it, but Valentina knew she was safe. Safe from the cruel nature of my being but that didn't mean I didn't have other ways to coerce the truth out of her. I touched her hip. She jumped in surprise and bumped into the windowsill with a gasp.

The feel of her warmth through her clothes had a stronger effect on me than I liked.

I focused on Valentina's reaction, ignoring my own. "Turn around," I ordered. Valentina turned to face me but she didn't meet my eyes. I lifted her head, meeting those damn stunning eyes. As always, she shivered ever so slightly under my touch and that reaction went straight to my cock.

Valentina didn't try to pull away or lower her gaze. She held mine almost stubbornly but her chin tensed. She was nervous, and not just because of our closeness. She held onto a lie. The question was, which one.

"So your words downstairs were simply meant to provoke?" I asked in a low voice. I hardly ever raised my voice, not even when I dealt with my soldiers, and I certainly wouldn't when dealing with my own wife.

Valentina's eyes watered and a tear rolled down her smooth cheek, bursting on my index finger. I let go of her. Tears didn't bother me. I'd had grown men cry on their knees in front of me, but the sight of my wife's turmoil caused an unpleasant twinge in my chest. Valentina withdrew herself from my closeness at once.

“Why are you crying?” I asked carefully, trying to figure out Valentina’s mood. She didn’t strike me as someone who cried often.

“Because you scare me!”

“Until today you never seemed scared of me,” I said. Evoking fear in others came naturally to me and it was something I’d used to my advantage in the past and still did. Fear certainly would have made Valentina reveal the truth but I didn’t want my wife scared of me.

“Then maybe I’m a good actress.”

“You have no reason to be scared of me, Valentina. What are you hiding?”

Her eyes flitted down to my chin, avoiding my gaze, trying to cling to the lie she had no way of protecting. “Nothing.”

I wrapped my fingers around her wrist, a warning and a request. “You are lying about something. And as your husband, I want to know what it is.”

Valentina’s eyes flashed with anger, surprising me in their vehemence. “You mean as the Boss you want to know, because so far you haven’t exactly been acting like my husband.”

She was right. I hadn’t acted like a husband, not a good one, not even a decent one. I had been trampling on those vows but that wasn’t the point, and I wouldn’t allow her to make it one. “Why would you still be a virgin?”

“I told you I’m not!” She tried to evade the situation by ripping from my hold but I didn’t release her. Instead, I drew

her closer until she was pressed up to me, but I regretted my decision the moment her scent hit me, a spicy perfume with a flowery note and Valentina's very own tantalizing scent. Her pulse sped up, her lips parted, eyes dilated as she stared up at me. She licked her lips, a nervous gesture, and my groin tightened with a new wave of desire for the woman in front of me. I wanted Valentina, there was no denying it.

I shoved the sensation down. "So if I were to take you toward our bed right now—" I said quietly and pressed Valentina closer to our bed. "—and make you mine, I wouldn't find out that you lied to me just now."

She wouldn't be able to hide it from me if she was a virgin. When I'd taken Carla's virginity, there had been no mistaking it. Pain flared in my chest, burning hot, and I shoved any thought of her out of my mind.

Valentina tugged at my hold. "You wouldn't because you won't take me to that bed now."

I focused on the woman in front of me. She'd tried to sound certain but a hint of uncertainty remained. "I won't?"

"No, because you wouldn't take me against my will. You disapprove of rape."

"That's what you hear?" I asked with a laugh.

She held my gaze. "Yes. You gave the Underbosses direct orders to tell their men you'd castrate anyone who used rape as a means of revenge or torture."

"I did. I think a woman should never have to submit to anyone but her husband. But you are my wife." In our world, a woman's body belonged to her husband. Nobody would

question me no matter what I did to Valentina, not only because my word was law but also because our old-fashioned traditions protected me.

Valentina shivered, the sophisticated mask slipping, revealing what I often forgot: she was much younger than me. “But still,” she whispered.

“Yes, still,” I said firmly and released her. “Now I want you to tell me the truth. I’ll always treat you with respect, but I expect the same from you. I don’t tolerate lies. And eventually, we will share a bed and then, Valentina, I’ll know the truth.”

“When will we ever share a bed like husband and wife, and not just sleep beside each other? Will that ever happen?”

If only she knew how often I’d imagined fucking her, and how desperately I wanted to throw her on the bed. “The truth. And remember I will know eventually.”

Valentina ducked her head, her shoulders tensing.

“Valentina.”

“What I said in the living room was the truth,” she admitted quietly, looking up at me through her lashes. Her cheeks reddened in embarrassment.

A strange thrill shot through me at her admittance, unexpected and unwanted. “That’s what I thought, but now I ask why?”

“Why is it such a surprising thought that Antonio didn’t want me? Maybe he didn’t find me attractive. You obviously don’t, or you wouldn’t spend most evenings in your office

and your nights with your back to me. We both know that if you wanted me, if you found me desirable at all, I'd have lost my virginity on our wedding night."

Desirable wasn't a strong enough word to describe Valentina. She was gorgeous, elegant. My eyes dipped to her neckline. During her few seduction attempts in the first days, she'd worn lingerie that had almost broken my resolve. Now I was glad my self-control had won out. If I'd fucked Valentina in those days, it would have been fueled with anger, hard and fast. I would have noticed her innocence too late and might have hurt her. That wasn't what she deserved. And yet I knew she would never get the lovemaking she wanted for her first time. "I thought we agreed on the fact that I wouldn't force you," I said.

Valentina's chest heaved and she blushed further. "But you wouldn't have to force me. You are my husband and I want to be with you. I've practically thrown myself at you for days now, and you didn't even notice my body. If you found me attractive, you would have shown some kind of reaction. I guess I'm just lucky to always end up with husbands who find me repulsive."

Anger filled me. Anger at myself for being incapable of doing what I should have done on our wedding night. "You aren't repulsive to me. Trust me, I find you attractive."

Valentina's eyebrows twitched in doubt. How could she believe I didn't desire her? Most of my damn thoughts these days revolved around fantasies of how I wanted to claim her pussy and mouth. I stepped closer to her, trying to ignore

the way my body screamed to make her mine. “I do. Do not doubt my words. Whenever I catch a glimpse of the creamy white skin of your thighs…” I stroked her soft thigh, feeling goosebumps rise on her skin. She was warm and soft and mine. Shock flashed across Valentina’s face, followed by desire, beckoning to a side of me I was doing my damnedest to suppress. “Or when I see the outline of your breasts through the little nothings you wear to bed…” I continued, unable to stop myself from touching the swell of Valentina’s breasts. “I want to throw you onto our bed and bury myself in you.” The truth lingered between us and I quickly retracted my hand, forcing back my desire.

“You do? Then why—”

I pressed a finger against Valentina’s mouth, silencing her. The feel of her hot breath against my skin raised images of my cock in her mouth. It was a losing battle, I knew it, had known it for a long time. “It’s my turn to ask questions, and you promise not to lie.” She gave a small nod, worry swirling in her eyes. “Why did Antonio not sleep with you?”

Valentina was a woman very few men could resist. I’d seen the way many of my soldiers looked at her when they thought I wasn’t paying attention.

“I promised him not to tell anyone ever.”

“Antonio is dead,” I said. It didn’t sit well with me that she chose loyalty to her dead husband over loyalty to me, but I knew I was being hypocritical. “I’m your husband now, and your promise to me is more important.”

She looked away again. “Valentina?”

“Antonio was gay.”

Surprise washed over me. I’d always prided myself on being a good judge of character and Antonio had never acted in a way that would have suggested he preferred men. Of course, my soldiers knew they had to hide their disposition or leave me no choice but to punish them. “I never suspected anything. Are you sure?”

Valentina gave me an exasperated look. As usual, it angered and thrilled me equally. So very few people dared to show their true feelings in my company. “He brought his lover home sometimes,” she said.

“Why didn’t he sleep with you to create offspring? That would have fended off possible suspicions.” They hadn’t been married very long but eventually, people would have questioned why they were childless. It had been the case with me and Carla. I shoved the thought away.

“I don’t think that would have worked. You know…” She pointed toward my cock.

“He was infertile?”

A dark blush spread on Valentina’s cheeks, making me wonder why I was still bothering holding back. I wasn’t a good man, and trying to be one was a waste of time. I’d claim her, eventually.

“No, he mentioned once that he couldn’t get one up with women.” I returned my attention to Valentina who looked honestly uncomfortable, and her words made me realize something else. She’d never seen an erection.

I needed to focus on protecting the Outfit, not the nature of my desire for my wife.

“Who was his lover?”

“I can’t tell you. Please don’t make me.”

I regarded Valentina’s face closely as I touched her upper arms, knowing the effect my closeness had on her. “If it’s someone from the Outfit I need to know, and if he isn’t… the Outfit comes first. I need to protect all those placing their trust in me.”

“I can’t tell you. I won’t. I’m sorry, Dante, but no matter what you do, I won’t give you a name.”

Disobedience wasn’t something I tolerated, not even in my family. Carla had never opposed me, had been naturally submissive, but Valentina was anything but. It made me want to force her into submitting. “You’ve lived a sheltered life, Valentina. I’ve had hardened men say the same to me, and in the end they gave up all their secrets.”

“Then do what you have to do,” she gritted out and withdrew from my hold once more. “Cut off my toes and feed them to me. Beat me, burn me, cut me, but I’d rather die than be responsible for the death of an innocent man.”

Innocent. That wasn’t a term she would have used for a Made Man. “So he’s an outsider.”

Valentina’s expression was all the answer I needed. “I didn’t say that.”

“You didn’t have to. If Antonio took his lover home, I assume you’ve met him and know his name and can describe him to me.”

Valentina lifted her chin in defiance. Something deep in my chest stirred, something possessive and primal. I moved close again, forcing her to deal with my presence.

“Aren’t you loyal to me? Don’t you think you owe me the truth? Don’t you think it’s your duty? Not only because I’m the Boss of the Outfit, but because I’m your husband,” I said.

Valentina narrowed her eyes. That wasn’t the reaction I’d expected. “And you owe me a decent wedding night. As my husband, it should be your duty to take care of my needs. I suppose we both will have to live with the disappointment.”

Fuck it all. The problem was I wanted to fuck her, to fuck her into submitting, wanted to domineer and possess her. It wasn’t what she needed, what a husband should do, but fuck, she was pushing my buttons. I’d never felt that urge with Carla. She’d been so gentle-minded and submissive, I could have never fucked her like I wanted to fuck Valentina. I’d only made love to her.

I grabbed Valentina and jerked her against me, so her back was pressed up against my chest and her firm butt against my cock. I considered gripping her neck and bending her over, considered fucking her right here and there from behind. Maybe then she’d stop wanting me to become the husband she desired.

“I’m a patient hunter, Valentina,” I said quietly, stifling my darkness, my anger, and sadness. “You will tell me what I want to know eventually.” I ran my palm down her side, feeling her tremble under the touch and my cock stirring in response. My fingertips grazed her smooth thigh and

Valentina held her breath, desperate for my touch, but not as desperate as I felt to claim her. God, I wanted to own this woman.

My hand trailed up her thigh until I reached her panties. The lace was drenched with her juices. Valentina's arousal was like a siren's song. She leaned back against me, her breathing deepening, nipples puckering under her flimsy nightgown. Begging me to fuck her. I pushed a finger under her panties, stifling a groan at the feel of her wet, hot slit. My finger stroked over her soft flesh, then delved between her folds, feeling their smoothness and Valentina's wetness. "You want this?" I growled, my voice drenched with desire. I needed to get a grip on myself, needed to rein this in. Losing control wasn't an option.

"Yes," Valentina said. Her voice was throaty, needy. She pressed her pussy against my hand, making my finger glide over her opening. I wrapped my arm around her waist, stopping her movements. Feeling her tight pussy against my fingertip made me want to exchange the digit for my cock. "I want you, Dante."

"Tell me what I want to know." I wasn't even sure if this was still about coercing information out of my wife because I doubted I could have stopped rubbing my fingers over her folds. Valentina's breathing deepened, her hips making small rocking motions as she got closer to her release. She got wetter, and I had to force myself to keep up the gentle touch and not finger-fuck her like I'd fantasized about. Valentina began to shake, more arousal making my

fingertips slide easily between her pussy lips. Valentina leaned her head back against my shoulder. “Don’t you want me?”

Didn’t she see? I wanted to fuck her so hard she couldn’t walk, wanted to spill my cum down her throat, wanted to claim her. Her green eyes swam with need and desire, and that alone might have convinced me to throw her on the bed and show her how much I wanted her. But behind the apparent desire, I detected her insecurity, her anxiety, her need for tenderness. I stroked my finger up to her clit, rubbing it with the pad and Valentina’s eyes widened in shock, her perfect lips falling open, as she came under my hand. My cock was painfully hard as I watched her succumb to pleasure, knowing I could give her so much more, show her different forms of pleasure.

I wanted Valentina, had never desired a woman like I did her. And that was the problem. She was my wife. I’d made a vow to be good to her and I would keep it. I wouldn’t fuck her, not when she deserved lovemaking and tenderness. My wife, not a whore. “I do. That’s the problem.” I released her before I did something I’d regret, and definitely something she would regret. I didn’t look at her again as I strode out of the bedroom, needing to bring distance between my wife and me.

I didn’t slow my steps until I reached my office and closed the door. I went straight to the liquor cabinet, fixing myself a strong drink. The moment I brought up the glass with the whiskey, I released a harsh breath and closed my

eyes. Valentina's scent lingered on my fingers. The sweet scent of her arousal. I wanted to taste it, taste her. I downed the whiskey in one gulp and put the glass back down. My cock pressed against my pants, hard and leaking pre-cum. I resisted the urge to jerk off in the middle of my office. I wasn't a goddamn teenage boy and even then, I'd possessed more self-control than that.

I walked around the desk and sank down, my eyes going to the picture frame on the mahogany surface. An image of Carla and me shortly after we'd married. My chest tightened as it always did when I looked at the picture. A flicker of guilt filled me. It wasn't an emotion I was very familiar with.

I'd sworn to Carla that I would always love her, always remember her. I'd sworn it on her deathbed, had made a vow. I had never wanted to marry after she'd died. I'd wanted to live with her memory like I'd sworn.

People thought I was the epitome of control but I wasn't. It hadn't taken long after Carla's death before I'd broken the first promise, before I'd sought whores to fuck. It had been angry, desperate fucking, a way to relieve tension and pain. I'd made peace with my sinful nature, had told myself it didn't affect the vow I gave because these women were nothing but a fuck thing. They might as well have been rubber dolls for all I cared about them.

But things with Valentina were different. I desired her, wanted to fuck her, but I respected her, not only because she was my wife, but also because of her cleverness and her backbone. She was a good woman. A woman who deserved

a good husband. Sighing, I opened my laptop, deciding to bury myself in last month's numbers to distract myself, and knowing full well it wouldn't work forever.

It was way after midnight when I moved up to the bedroom. Instead of heading into the bathroom to get ready, I went over to the bed. Valentina lay on her back, face tilted toward my side of the bed. In the sliver of light streaming in from the hallway, her skin glowed enticingly. One long leg peeked out from under the covers, making me want to trace her smooth skin again, to reach higher and slide a finger into her.

I turned and grabbed pajama bottoms on my way outside. It was better if I spent the night in my office as long as I didn't get a better grip on my desire.

PART 3

My mind wandered to Valentina, to her admittance.

I'd chosen a married woman because I didn't want the burden of being with a virgin because I knew I couldn't be what an inexperienced woman needed. A gentle lover who held them in his arms as he whispered words of adoration in their ear.

The man capable of that kind of thing had died with Carla. That man had only ever existed because of Carla.

It wasn’t in my nature to be gentle or loving, now less than ever.

Still a depraved part of me, the part I hid behind expensive suits and a mask of utter control, rejoiced at the knowledge of Valentina’s innocence. That part of me wanted to lay claim on her.

I fought the desire, held on to my outward control, when I knew it was a losing battle. I wanted Valentina, wanted her like most men would want a woman of her beauty and inexperience. Wanted to own and corrupt her. I hadn’t been with a woman since I’d married Valentina and even before that my visits with whores had been infrequent. My body screamed for release, and not just of my desire, also of the pent-up anger simmering in my veins.

But Valentina was my wife and she deserved better than sex out of anger. I knew I wouldn’t be able to give her much more.

After two cups of black coffee, I hid in my office again the next morning. I’d never avoided someone. It wasn’t in my nature. I thrived on conflict.

My eyes darted to the picture frame with a photo of Carla. I grabbed it. These last few days fewer of my nights had been filled with the memory of her last breath. Instead phantasies of claiming Valentina had occupied my nights.

Valentina opened the door.

I quickly set down the frame. “What are you doing here?”

My voice was harsh.

Valentina froze for a moment before she squared her shoulders. “This is my home too, isn’t it?”

“Of course it is, but this is my office and I need to work.”

“You always do. I wanted to see if you were all right.”

“Why wouldn’t I be?”

“Why? Because you acted very strange yesterday. One moment you’re touching me and the next you can’t get away from me fast enough.”

If only she knew… “You don’t know anything about me, Valentina.”

“I know, and I want to change that, but you keep pushing me away.”

My eyes darted to Carla once more. “I never wanted to get married again. For good reason.”

“I didn’t ask you to marry me!” Valentina snapped, surprising me with her unbridled anger, so unrestrained and exhilarating.

She whirled around and rushed off, throwing the door shut with so much force that a book tumbled off the shelf. Like a hunter awakened, I chased her and gripped her wrist. “You have an impossible temper.”

Her eyes narrowed, and fuck, I wanted to sink my cock into her right in the middle of the hallway.

“That’s your fault.”

“This marriage has always been for practical reasons. I told you that.”

“But that doesn’t mean we can’t try to make it a real marriage. There are no logical reasons why we shouldn’t sleep with each other. You slept with prostitutes, so why can’t you sleep with me?”

Her eyes swam with confusion and hurt. Valentina was young and in some regards naïve, even if she often put up a sophisticated front. “Because I was angry and I wanted to fuck someone. I wanted it rough and hard. I wasn’t looking for closeness or tenderness or whatever it is you want. I took whatever pleasure I wanted, and then I left. What you’re looking for, I can’t give you. The part that was capable of it died with my wife, and it won’t come back.”

Valentina shifted closer. “You don’t know what I want. Maybe we want the same thing.”

“I can see in your eyes that’s not true. You want to make love, but I can’t give you that. I do want to possess you, want to own every part of you, but not for the reasons you want me to. I’m a heartless bastard, Valentina. Don’t try to see anything else in me. The business suit and emotionless face is the thin layer covering up the fucking abyss that’s my soul and heart. Don’t try to glimpse beneath it—you won’t like what you find.”

I released her and stalked back into my office.



Getting work done was out of the question after our argument. All I could think about was Valentina.

When a knock sounded around dinnertime, I expected Valentina to ask if I would eat with her. The moment I opened the door, I knew that wasn't the reason why she was here. Beneath the silky material of her bathrobe she was naked.

"Can I come in?"

I stepped back and walked over to the desk, away from my wife, even as my insides screamed for me to rip away the last piece of clothing.

Steeling my expression, I asked, "What's going on?"

"I made up my mind."

"About what?"

Valentina parted her bathrobe, revealing a body straight out of my darkest fantasies. Valentina was tall and slim with enticingly swung hips. A small patch of dark hair covered her sex. "About us. About sex."

My groin tightened but I forced my eyes away. "You should leave."

"Don't turn your back on me. Look at me. I think I deserve at least that small decency, Dante."

She didn't know anything.

"Am I your wife?"

"Of course, you are." Which was part of the problem. If she were any woman, I'd have fucked her already.

"Then claim your rights, Dante. Make me yours."

My gaze traced her nipples, imagining tasting them, sucking them while I slammed into her.

“I have needs too. Would you prefer if I found a lover who relieved you of the burden to touch me?”

Raw jealousy shot through me. “No,” I growled, moving closer to Val. The need to possess her filled me, almost impossible to suppress.

Valentina pressed her naked body against mine. I grabbed her, touching the heated skin of her back. The desire in her eyes was a trickling creek in comparison to the raging Tsunami of my hunger for her. Valentina pushed up to kiss me but I didn’t lower my head.

Hurt, she stumbled away and fled my office.

PART 4

She didn’t deserve this. I glanced down at my white-knuckled fist then at the bulge in my pants. Who the fuck was I kidding? I wasn’t a good man. I could take whatever I wanted, why did I deprive myself when Valentina was willing? I wanted her, and Valentina wanted me. I’d always prided myself on my control, so why was I so scared of losing it around her?

Without thinking it through, I went in search of my wife. I still wasn't sure what I'd do once I saw her, if I'd finally listen to the roaring voice in my body demanding I claim her.

I opened the bedroom door and found Valentina on the bed. Her bathrobe wide open, her legs slightly parted and her elegant, long fingers stroking her pussy. She let out a moan I felt in every damn fiber of my body and I sucked in a breath, knowing the battle I'd fought these last few weeks was lost.

There was no use trying to stop the unstoppable. Tonight I'd make her mine.

Valentina's eyes opened in shock. She wrenched her hand back, closed her bathrobe and tried to get off the bed.

I moved without thinking, barring her way. She looked up at me in shock, her fingers still pressing her robe together, depriving me of her gorgeous body. "No," I got out, past the pulsating desire in my body.

I bent over her, forcing her back and she yielded, lying down and looking up at me with huge eyes. She smelled delicious and finally her hand let go of the robe, letting it fall open, baring herself to me. I leaned further down. This woman was mine, every inch of her. Soon I'd bury myself in her.

I supported my weight on one arm and parted Valentina's legs with my knee. Her folds glistened with her arousal, and for a second I wanted to unzip my pants and take her right then. Maybe then she'd realize what kind of man I was.

I cupped her breast, feeling her nipple harden against my palm. Valentina was so damn responsive, so ready to be taken. I pinched her nipple, a warning and promise, trying to see if she could really take what she would get. If she understood that this wouldn't be lovemaking, that this would be me laying my claim, me ripping her innocence from her. Valentina arched up with a moan, and I was lost. I tugged at her nipple, coercing more moans from her parted lips. Her eyes were on my face, full of need and surprise. She rocked her hips with every tug of her nipple. This was turning her on, making her wet. It was obvious how untrained her body was, how willing to submit to pleasure. I'd show her so much of it. Her nipple was red from my ministrations and I couldn't resist anymore. I bent down and sucked the silky nub into my mouth, enjoying how hard with arousal it was.

Valentina bucked up, needing more, demanding I give her what she needed. But she'd have to learn that we played this by my rules only. I grabbed her hips and pressed her into the bed. She shifted her pussy against my knee, and I tightened my hold further. Her hot center against my knee made me want to stop the slow approach.

I nicked her nipple with my teeth in warning and Valentina groaned, jerking her pussy against me again.

My eyes focused on her face, on the innocent surrender in her expression. She submitted to me, trusted me. I reached for her knee and opened her legs wider. There was no resistance. Her body was ready and she looked more than

willing, but I forced myself to say, “Tell me now if you want this.”

Valentina’s chest heaved. Realization flickered in her eyes that this was it. I half hoped, half dreaded she’d say no. “I want this.”

“Good.” I turned my attention toward her other nipple, teasing it with my tongue as my fingers found her dripping center. I pressed down on her clit and Valentina exploded at once, crying out and shaking. She was so fucking wet, so warm and the sounds dripping from her lips went to my cock. She was like a firecracker. Valentina raised her eyes almost defiantly. Oh, I’d love to make her submit to me in bed.

I dipped my fingers lower until they brushed her opening and then I began to enter her. She was impossibly tight and discomfort flashed on her beautiful face. I kept pushing into her until my fingers were buried in her, then I forced myself to wait a moment for her to adapt even if it was the last thing I wanted.

The moment her walls softened their crushing grip, I started to finger-fuck her gently, giving her time to stretch and prepare for what was to come.

“You are incredibly tight. I can’t wait to be inside you.” I barely recognized my own voice, so drenched with desire. Valentina came again and I could barely hold back a groan.

I pulled my fingers out. They were slick with her arousal. She was ready for me. She had to be because I couldn’t hold back anymore. I didn’t want to.

I shrugged off my jacket before I unbuckled my belt

“You’re hard,” Valentina said in surprise as she looked at the tent in my pants.

“I’m capable of getting an erection. I’m not impotent.” Her look of fascination nearly made me laugh and I was glad for Valentina’s words because they reminded me that she was a young woman, my wife, who deserved any shred of tenderness I could spare.

“That’s not what I meant. But I thought you weren’t attracted by my body,” she said.

How could she still believe that? So dangerously oblivious when it came to detecting a man’s desire. “Don’t worry. Your body would leave few members of the male species unaffected.”

I got rid of my pants and boxers. It had been almost two months since I’d been with a woman and I couldn’t wait anymore, not when Valentina lay in front of me with spread legs, waiting for me to stake my claim.

“Scoot up,” I ordered, even as I realized that I should choose gentler words, but I’d warned her. I nudged her opening with my tip, stifling a groan at her hot arousal. Her walls fisted me tightly as I started to push in. Valentina tensed further and cried out in pain. Despite my dark hunger and the fierce throbbing of my cock, the sound of her discomfort was like a balm for the fire in my veins, reminding me again that she was my responsibility. I paused, waited for Valentina to relax, for a sign that she could take more of me. Her green eyes found mine,

swimming with nerves and trust. She grabbed my shoulders and nodded. The permission I needed.

I pushed in the rest of the way in one sharp stroke, forcing her walls to surrender. Valentina pressed up against me, her lips thinning from the pain.

Pleasure thrummed heavily through my balls and cock. I couldn't remember I had felt like this—if ever. "Tell me when I can move."

"It's okay."

I started fucking her slowly. Every thrust pushed me closer to release. Staring down at Valentina's stunned and sweaty face only increased my pleasure. Primal satisfaction at being the first inside of her filled me. This was supposed to be mere fucking but as I glanced down at the woman beneath me, it felt like more than using Valentina for pleasure. Being close to her physically felt good in unexpected ways. Acting on impulse, I kissed Valentina when I came. For a heartbeat, I allowed myself to lose myself in the taste of her, my eyes closed. When I opened them, catching Valentina's hopeful expression, I quickly pulled away. I didn't want her to get her hopes up for something that I couldn't give her.

After making sure she was all right, I left the room without a look at her undoubtedly hurt face.

It was dishonorable to leave my wife like that after our first time together, after her first time, but the force of my guilt and confusion compelled me to seek isolation. I needed time to think, time to calm down.

Zita gave me a curious look as I passed her on the way to my office.

Once the door closed behind me, I staggered to my desk and sank down in the chair. My gaze landed on the picture of Carla. A new wave of guilt crashed down on me. Raking my fingers through my hair, I put the frame down, not able to bear my late wife's eyes on me.

Another emotion mixed with the guilt over betraying Carla: guilt over how I treated Valentina. She'd done nothing wrong. Remembering the way, she'd given herself to me mere minutes ago only increased the weight on my conscience. I sank back in my chair.

As a rational man, I knew it was unreasonable to feel obligated to a dead woman when I had a breathing, feeling woman I was supposed to care for.

And yet, here I was, torn apart between the present and the past.

I picked up the frame, opened a desk drawer then hesitated before I finally stowed it inside and closed the drawer.

This wasn't going to silence the past. My fingers lingered on the handle. With a sigh, I leaned back and closed my eyes.

PART 5

The next day, I met with Giovanni, Rocco, and my father in the Scuderi mansion for our weekly meeting. Father regarded me with narrowed eyes as I stepped in. He had been keeping an even closer eye on me since my marriage. I wasn't sure what he was waiting for.

I shook Rocco's hand. "How's married life treating you?"

I gave him a tight smile, not replying. My marriage was none of their business. Then I turned to Giovanni.

"How's Val?" he asked quietly. Concern flickered in his eyes.

His question was difficult to answer. Valentina was unhappy with our current situation, last night hadn't changed that. She wanted closeness on an emotional level. But she was a clever woman. Her asking me to work showed that. But even a job wouldn't change Valentina's unhappiness entirely. Yet, I had to admit my suggestion for her to take over as manager in the casino was fueled by the hope that she'd be too busy to ponder on our emotional estrangement. It seemed like the only way I could guarantee her happiness, and I wanted her to be happy. "She's doing well. She wants to start working."

Surprise filled Giovanni's face. I crossed the room to Father who hadn't risen from his armchair. "I assume you didn't allow her that kind of nonsense," he quipped.

Rocco motioned toward the armchair beside my father's but I shook my head, preferring the higher vantage point

when dealing with the old man. Rocco sank down, followed by Giovanni, waiting for my reply.

“I suggested that she could work in one of our Underground casinos.”

“The one near the Palermo?” Rocco guessed. I’d only recently killed the previous manager because he stole money from the Outfit.

“Yes.”

“Raffaele and Leonardo won’t like that. What is she supposed to do anyway? I don’t suppose you want her to be a complimentary girl,” Father muttered, smoothing back his white hair even though it was in place.

I narrowed my eyes at him. Giovanni’s face turned red with anger, his hand clenching around his knee.

“I expect everyone to show respect to my wife, you included, Father,” I said quietly. Many people in the Outfit would be offended by the mere idea of a Capo’s wife working, especially in a position of importance. It was a decision for Valentina.

Father’s eyes flashed with anger but I was the head of the Outfit now. While he was still greatly respected among our men, they saw me as the more capable leader, had done so for many years already. Father was old. It was time for him to die. Unfortunately, he clung to live like all narcists did.

Pushing my hands into my pockets, I said casually, “She’s going to manage the casino.”

“That’s ridiculous,” Father said, shaking his head. “Neither Leonardo nor Raffaele will listen to orders from a

woman.”

Rocco’s expression was carefully blank but I suspected he shared my father’s views. He was too clever not to side with me though, and he’d try to convince my men of my standpoint even if he disagreed. He was an opportunist through and through, which was useful and appalling at once.

Father turned to Rocco as I’d expected. “You can’t agree with Dante’s choice.”

Rocco smiled tightly. “I trust my Capo to do what is best.”

Father’s mouth thinned. I preferred the term Capo, but he’d instilled the word Boss. This subtle use of Capo showed clearly which side Rocco was on: mine. His gratefulness extended into the present. Letting him live had proven useful in many ways over the years. He gave me a subtle nod, his eyes like that of a dog expecting a treat.

Father turned to Giovanni who, like Rocco, knew better than to show his sentiments openly. “You can’t possibly want your daughter to work. It’s not proper.”

“If it makes Val happy and if Dante agrees with it, I don’t see why I should disapprove. She’ll stop working once she’s a mother anyway.”

I stiffened. Having children was expected, especially now that I was in my thirties and my first marriage hadn’t produced any offspring. I fought against the flood of anger and sadness that bubbled up.

Father nodded grimly. “Whenever that is. But I’m sure Dante has everything planned out.” He didn’t say anything after that. Maybe he finally understood that his days of power were over. My word was law now. He’d still give me his opinion on the matter repeatedly no doubt.

After the meeting was over, I pulled Father aside. “I think it’s time for you to retire fully and stop attending my meetings with my men. Your presence undermines my authority and that’s something I can’t allow.”

“Allow?” Father repeated sharply. His old eyes met mine, trying to stare me down but as had been the result in the last few years, he eventually looked away. “Very well. If that’s what you want.”

“It is,” I said firmly.

I returned to the car but didn’t get the chance to start the engine before my phone rang. Mother. “What can I do for you?”

“I hear you’re allowing your wife to work?”

She heard it from Father of course. “Yes.”

“It’s going to cause a scandal, Dante. You’ve already offended many people by taking a widow, why do you insist on breaking my heart? Think of the Outfit!”

My mouth thinned at her theatrical performance. Her words brought my mind back to Valentina and our last night, tantalizing memories I didn’t want to replay while talking to my mother. “Mother, I’m leading the Outfit into the future. I have to hang up now. I’ve business to attend to.”

She let out a small sniff but I knew her fake cries. I ended the call. During my drive home, my phone binged again. Chancing a glance down, I caught the message from Ines.

I’m proud of you.

My mouth twitched.



Allowing Valentina to work was partly to my benefit of course. She was busy and had less time to seek my company. As I’d expected, the past wasn’t easily put to rest. I avoided Valentina’s closeness as much as possible during the day, but at night my desire always won out. I’d never been this unrestrained, this dominated by my needs. Valentina was unaware of her power over me, and not just by night. Even during the day, I caught myself thinking of her. Something about the way she insisted on pushing my limits intrigued me.

But while I kept Carla’s photo in my drawer, her memories lingered. They weren’t easily forgotten, nor did I want them to be.

In the next few weeks, Valentina proved to be a capable asset in the casino and a more and more daring lover in bed. We fell into a routine that suited me well but that obviously bothered Valentina. I pretended to be unaware of her dissatisfaction because it allowed me to ignore my own

annoyance with myself. Part of me wanted to seek out Valentina for more than sex, but my stubborn nature kept me rooted to a promise I should have never given.

In an attempt to show Valentina in subtle ways that I appreciated her, I went to our family's jeweler and asked him for a necklace with emeralds. He had several on display. Since almost every Made Man from the Outfit bought jewelry for their wives and sometimes mistresses there, he always had a wide selection to choose from.

I picked the one that had almost the same shade as Valentina's eyes. Despite her breathtaking body, her eyes haunted me more than her curves.

On my way back home, my phone rang with a call from Tommaso. I picked up, my lips thinning. He was a remnant from my father's reign, a disgusting waste of space and air. Unfortunately, he wasn't involved in attacks because of his back, so he couldn't find an unfortunate end through a Bratva bullet. "Yes?" I clipped.

"Sorry to disturb you, Dante. Is my wife at your house? Your wife picked her up without my permission."

"My wife only needs my permission, not yours," I said in a low voice.

Tommaso cleared his throat. "Of course. But Bibiana is my wife."

"I'm sure Valentina is having coffee with her."

"I'd appreciate it if you could give me a call if you know more."

"I'll see what I can do." I hung up.

When I pulled up in the driveway, Enzo was already waiting for me.

“She took the car without you?” I guessed.

He nodded, looking unnerved. “She was gone before we could act.”

I walked into the house and as expected I found Bibiana and Valentina in the hallway. Valentina shifted, shielding her friend from my view as if she worried I’d hurt her. Bibiana was a poor woman. She certainly didn’t have to fear me.

“Good evening, Bibiana.”

She cowered, not meeting my eyes. “Evening.” Her face and arms were littered with bruises. It was a fate I’d protected Ines from. If she’d married Jacopo, she would have been a broken shadow of the woman she was now—like Bibiana. I had to consider options to dispose of Tommaso at some point.

After I’d informed Tommaso that his wife would spend some time here, I retreated to my office to give Valentina and Bibiana some time.

I sank down in my desk chair and twisted the small satin box in my hand. A Valentine’s day present always evoked emotions in women. It had been the case with Carla. She’d always gushed and cried when I’d given her something. Sighing, I set the box down on my desk. My eyes darted to the drawer where I kept the picture frame. I’d resisted looking at it today.

Instead of giving in to my need to drown in the past, I picked up my phone and called Pietro.

“Dante, what a pleasant surprise.”

“Hello Pietro.”

I opened the box and stared at the emerald pendant. Valentina’s eye color… God, those eyes.

“Is anything the matter?”

“How’s Ines?”

“Getting bigger every day,” he said with a small laugh so full of tenderness that my heart lurched in my chest. “Only two more months.” He fell silent. “How are things with Valentina?” His voice was careful. He knew how reluctantly I shared any private details.

“Things are going well,” I said evasively. “I assume word about her new job is already making the rounds.”

Pietro laughed. “Well, what did you expect? It’s the first time a Capo’s wife is working. So far even the wives of Underbosses always only stayed home.”

“Valentina is eager to work and she’s got leadership qualities.”

“You’ll have to do a lot of convincing in the Outfit, you realize that?”

“I do, but I also don’t have to explain my decisions. The Outfit is under my rule.” It wasn’t as easy as that. I needed the support from my Underbosses and Captains, so I’d have to tread carefully, especially about our traditions.

“How are things going in Minneapolis?”

Pietro easily followed my topic change. I’d never regretted my choice to support his quest to marry Ines, and

he was one of the few men I trusted. I closed the box with the pendant, unsure if I should give it to Valentina.



Valentina was still asleep when I got up. As usual, her face was twisted toward me, gorgeous in sleep and without a touch of makeup. She deserved more than I gave her. It was a truth I knew without a flicker of doubt. I set the box with the necklace and a handwritten note down beside her then left.

I had a busy day ahead of me. My Underboss from Detroit was in town and we wanted to discuss his problems with the Bratva.

Later that day, I was on my way to check in on Valentina in the casino. Leo and Raffaele still needed clear instructions from me. Their reluctance to work under a woman was very apparent. My phone rang when I was only a block away. “Enzo, what’s the matter?”

“We have a problem, boss. Valentina’s just left the casino without telling anyone and is meeting with an unknown man.”

Fury followed by startling jealousy washed through me. Valentina was alone with an unknown man?

“I’ll be there in a minute. Wait for me.”

Enzo was already in the parking lot when I pulled up. I didn’t waste any time and followed him to a warehouse next

to our casino. Glancing around the corner, I found Valentina talking to an outsider. He definitely wasn't one of my men. He was barely taller than my wife and had reddish hair. My eyes narrowed as I tried to stifle my jealous rage. This overwhelming sense of possessiveness was new to me. Enzo and I crept closer, keeping close to the building.

The man grabbed Valentina's arm. "Valentina—"

Suppressing the urge to shoot the man on the spot, I said, "Hands off."

Valentina whirled around with a startled cry, her eyes wide. The man did the same but then tried to run away. Enzo grabbed him and pulled him into a headlock.

I stalked toward Valentina and gripped her arm. It took a lot of effort not to let my anger out on her. I'd given her lots of freedom, more than most Made Men gave their wives, and she seemed to abuse my trust in her.

I motioned for Enzo to take the man to the warehouse, away from prying eyes, and followed with Valentina. "So this is what you do when I'm not around? Meeting with other men?" I asked in a deadly voice.

Valentina gave me a shocked look. "No! It's not like you think."

"He's been lurking around the house twice now, boss," Enzo said, then grunted when the man's knee hit him in the groin.

"Explain," I snarled, my grip on Valentina's arm tightening even further, even as she winced.

"It's Frank."

I relaxed my hold on Valentina. A flicker of hurt shone in her eyes.

“Antonio’s lover.”

Enzo glanced my way. He’d occasionally met Antonio.

A gunshot rang in the silence and Enzo flinched with a cry. Another bullet collided with the wall above us.

I dragged Valentina to the ground with me, shielding her with my body, my gun pointed in the direction of our attackers. Frank freed himself and ran away. I aimed at him and pulled the trigger at the same time as Valentina shoved my arm. The bullet missed its target. “Valentina!” I growled. Frank disappeared from view before I could shoot again. “What the fuck was that?”

Valentina shook her head, her skin pale. “I don’t know! I thought he was alone. Frank doesn’t even know anyone who can shoot a gun.”

“You should have let me shoot him. Never interfere like that again.”

“He’s innocent. He doesn’t deserve death.”

“Bullshit. That guy laid a trap and you fucking walked into it,” Enzo muttered.

I nodded. This hadn’t been a coincidence. My wife had walked straight into a fucking trap.

Valentina looked at me. “What do you mean?”

She managed to appear sophisticated and well-acquainted with our ways, but ultimately, Valentina knew little of the true danger of mob life. “Haven’t you wondered why he wanted to meet you? Maybe he’s been approached

by the Russians and agreed to help them. They'd love to kill you."

"Frank wouldn't do that."

So trusting and naïve! I wouldn't lose Valentina. I couldn't.

After the reinforcement arrived and took Enzo to our doctor, I took Valentina home.

"I'm really sorry," she whispered during the ride to our mansion.

I didn't say anything, consumed with so many conflicting emotions I had trouble keeping in check. Anger at Valentina for disobeying my command, worry over losing her, and the need to prove to myself that this woman was mine. What I'd felt when I'd seen Valentina with Frank had been more than simple possessiveness, and then the acute terror I'd felt when the bullet missed Valentina's head by a few inches…

I didn't want to ponder my emotions, not these emotions, and focused on my anger for my wife.

After our arrival home, I headed straight for our bedroom, needing to get my fury out of my system. "I'm really sorry," Valentina said as we entered the room, but I had no intention of letting her off easily.

I pushed Valentina against the bedroom door, my chest pressed against her back, for once using my physical strength against my wife, rendering her motionless. My cock was already becoming hard, feeling Valentina's sexy body against mine.

“Why do you keep disobeying me, Valentina?” I growled. I pushed her skirt up and dug my erection against her ass, showing her what she did to me. She released a shuddering breath, goosebumps rising on her skin.

“I don’t know,” she admitted, her voice shaking.

My anger was overwhelming, only trumped by the fierce hunger consuming my very being.

“That’s the wrong answer.” I found Valentina wet when I touched her pussy and entered her with two fingers, making sure she was ready for the angry fucking that I craved. And fuck, she was. She was turned on by our fight, which angered and turned me on at the same time. Evoking conflicting emotions in me was Valentina’s specialty.

I started fucking her right against the door, not holding back. My anger ran free as I took her roughly, dominating her, not giving her a choice but to yield to my demands, and she did. Her moans spiraled out of control, her pussy slick around my cock and when she came with a cry and threw her head back, I couldn’t resist to kiss her harshly, claiming that beautiful mouth like I claimed her pussy. I kept pumping into her, overcome with hot-burning pleasure I’d never encountered before, and when I came inside of her and pressed a kiss to her neck, I wasn’t sure what I felt anymore.

PART 6

My anger was the safe option, so I focused on it and ignored Valentina completely the following weeks. It was a harsh punishment, for both of us. Lying beside her at night, with her enticing scent in my nose, with the heat of her gorgeous body beside mine, not fucking her was torture.

Valentina gave me space, and for once I wished she wouldn’t, wished she would try to seduce me like she’d done in the beginning just so I could give in.

Two weeks in, I lost my battle against myself. Valentina and I had just turned off the lights and lay beside each other in bed when the throbbing desire in my cock got too much. I pushed up on my elbow. “Not a word,” I growled.

Valentina sucked in her breath as I climbed down her body, shoved down her panties and licked her slit. She arched against my mouth with a stifled moan. I fucked her with my tongue, so eager for her pussy, my cock twitched against the mattress. She came within a few minutes. I hadn’t taken my time, impatient for more. I stood and slipped down my pajama pants. “Get on your knees, Valentina.”

I heard rustling then she appeared before me and sank down. In the dark of the room, I could only make out schemes. Grabbing her neck, I guided her toward my waiting cock. I didn't allow her to discover me like usual, not in the mood for the gentle approach tonight. Instead, I began to fuck her mouth, letting my anger fuel my moves. She gagged when I hit the back of her throat but didn't pull back. Her occasional moan around my cock and the way she shifted restlessly told me she enjoyed it very much.

"Do not touch yourself. I'm the only one who'll get you off," I snarled. She shivered and I knew she'd be leaking by now. Fuck. The thought toppled me over the edge and I spilled my cum down her throat, holding her in place with a firm grip on her neck. I pulled her up to me, then rasped into her ear. "I'm still mad at you. That's why you'll have to go to sleep now without a second orgasm."

She made a small sound of protest.

"Not a word, Valentina."

"Dante—"

"No," I growled.

I pulled up my pants and returned to bed. Valentina followed and stretched out beside me, watching me in the dark. She rubbed her legs together, obviously seeking relief and it was driving me insane, knowing how sopping wet she'd be.

Not saying a word, I parted her legs and thrust two fingers into her. Valentina clenched around me and arched

up with a moan. Keeping my fingers inside her, I nicked her earlobe. “I’m too lenient with you.”

I pulled my fingers out of her, half tempted to shove them into my mouth to taste Valentina again.

“Can I taste myself?”

My cock lurched. This woman was so much more than I’d expected, so much more than I could resist.



In the following weeks, I fucked Valentina every night and engaged in polite but detached conversation, even as I craved more. I couldn’t explain the pull between us. This primal connection was new for me. It was something I might have been able to handle but the accompanying emotions for my wife caught me by surprise. I needed control, thrived on it, but around Valentina I often lost it completely.

Things in the Outfit were tense, so I couldn’t use my emotional instability in the slightest. Ever since Rocco had called me a few minutes ago to tell me Gianna had run away to escape the marriage with Matteo Vitiello, I needed a clear head more than ever. This could destroy peace with the Famiglia, could toss us right into a bloody war.

My fury threatened to spill over but when Valentina entered my office, her pale skin immediately distracted me from my turmoil. She looked sick. She had been feeling off for a while now but I hadn’t really paid much attention, still

determined to keep my distance. Now my worry overruled my determination.

“You look pale. Are you still not feeling well? Maybe you should talk to the doc.”

She shook her head. “No, I…” Her eyes widened and she rushed out of my office. I quickly followed her toward the guest bathroom. She hung over the toilet and quickly flushed when I stepped inside. She tried to stand but swayed, so I grabbed her arm to stop her from falling.

“Valentina?”

She stumbled toward the sink and cleaned herself. Sweat glistened on her forehead. She didn’t look well. Had my dismissal led to her weakened state?

“I’m fine.”

She was lying. I followed her upstairs to our bedroom and touched her waist. “You know I hate it when you’re keeping secrets. Don’t make it a habit.”

Valentina swallowed and pressed a palm against her belly. Everything seemed to stand still when I realized what the gesture meant, and suddenly her constant sickness made sense.

“I’m pregnant.”

Valentina waited.

My insides were a raging ocean. The small sailboat of my joy at the news was soon tossed aside by the thunderous waves of my sadness, guilt, and anger. Carla and I had been trying to become parents. It had been her greatest wish, and I had been unable to give it to her. She’d died without ever

holding her child in her arms, without ever experiencing the joys of motherhood.

And Valentina was pregnant after such a short time. Without a struggle. Without heartbreak. “Pregnant?” I asked.

“Yes. We never used protection, so I don’t know why you’re acting so shocked. Wasn’t an heir one of the reasons why you married me?”

“That was the reason why my father wanted me to marry again.”

“So you don’t want kids?”

“Is it mine?” Carla had assured me that her doctor hadn’t found anything obviously wrong with her. I had never gone to a doctor myself.

Shock and acute pain crossed Valentina’s face as she backed away from me.

“Answer my question.”

“Of course, it is your child. You’re the only man I’ve ever slept with. How can you even ask such a question? How *dare* you?”

Carla wouldn’t have lied to me. She had no reason to. Doubt nagged at me, and that only fueled my fury further. I didn’t want to doubt my late wife. “I’m not keeping track of everything you do, and there are many men who frequent the casino that wouldn’t say no to a night with you. You’ve made a habit out of keeping things from me. Do I have to remind you of Frank?”

“How can you even say something like that? I’ve never given you any reason to doubt me like that. I’m loyal to this

marriage. There's a difference between not telling you about Frank and cheating on you."

"My first wife and I tried for years to get pregnant. It never worked. You and I have been married for less than four months and you're already pregnant."

"I don't know why you act as if that's impossible. If your first wife was infertile, then that's your explanation. Have you never consulted with a doctor? Or did you think it was you who was infertile?"

"We never went to a doctor to find out why we couldn't conceive. Not that it is any of your business. I won't discuss my first marriage with you."

"Too bad. We're discussing it now. I know why you didn't want to find out. You didn't want to know the truth, because you worried it would make you less of a man if it was your fault that your wife couldn't get pregnant. But now we know it wasn't your fault. It was Carla who was infertile."

Anger surged through me. "I told you I didn't want to talk about Carla."

"Why not? Because you still love her? Because you can't move on? I'm sorry you lost Carla, but I'm your wife now."

Valentina was right. Deep down I knew I needed to stop clinging to the past, but in this moment, I couldn't. Anger at myself bubbled up, stronger than any anger I'd ever felt toward Valentina.

"I'm so sick of you treating me like a whore. You ignore me by day and come to me at night for sex. And now you accuse me of cheating on you? Sometimes I think you hurt

me on purpose to keep me at arm's length. When will you finally move on? Your wife has been dead for four years; it's time you stop pitying yourself and realize that life goes on. When will you stop clinging to the memory of a dead woman and realize there's someone in your life who wants to be with you?"

I stalked toward her, furious that she threw this at me. "Don't talk about her."

"She's dead and she won't come back, Dante."

Acute pain pierced my chest at her words, making me want to lash out at everything around me. "Stop talking about her."

Fear flashed in Valentina's eyes. Fear of me, her own husband, but I was unable to apologize, unable to back down.

She raised her chin. "Or what? Do you want to hit me? Go ahead. It can't possibly be worse than the knife you thrust into my back by accusing me of carrying another man's child." I was a brutal man, there was no doubt about it, but hitting Valentina was the last thing I'd ever do.

"You're so busy honoring her memory and protecting the image of her you have in your mind that you don't realize how badly you're treating me. You lost your first wife through no fault of your own, but you will be losing me because you can't let go of her."

I should have apologized, but instead I watched Valentina move out of our bedroom.

PART 7

It took me weeks to ask Valentina to move back to our bedroom. An apology still didn't pass my lips, even if it would have been the right thing to do. Valentina was pregnant with my child and I was unable to admit to my mistake, unable to beg her for forgiveness like any good husband would have done. It still hurt to think that Carla hadn't told me the truth about her infertility. Ines had told me after I'd admitted to my argument with Valentina in a moment of weakness. Carla had worried I'd regard her as less if I found out she couldn't become pregnant, not to mention my father's reaction if he'd ever found out.

Despite my many faults, Valentina returned to our bedroom, fighting for our marriage, a thing I was still incapable of doing the way she deserved it. I tried to show her my willingness to do my part by removing Carla's belongings from the old bedroom. It felt like a betrayal of her but at the same time, I could feel a weight lifting off my heart with every piece of Carla that I carried away. The past had held power over me for too long. I needed to let it go. I couldn't lose Valentina.



Giovanni came over in the afternoon for our weekly meeting, but fifteen minutes before our agreed time. He hugged Valentina tightly, kissing her cheek, and whispered something in her ear that made her smile, which died when she looked at me.

Guilt always caught me by surprise, which it shouldn't, since it was a common feeling around my wife lately.

With another tender look at Valentina, Giovanni finally headed my way and followed me toward the office. He had trouble keeping his excitement at bay. Once we were in the office, he gripped my hand and squeezed. "Congratulations. I'm so happy for you and Val."

I gave a terse nod. This was the reaction Valentina had expected from me. Yet, I still couldn't show her what I felt, that I was looking forward to having a child with her.

Our child. It was a startling thought. I'd made my peace with not having children when Carla had become sick. I'd never blamed her, even when she often felt guilty for not giving me an heir like everyone expected from her. It had almost felt like another betrayal that Valentina had become pregnant so quickly. Not only did I desire Valentina, did I long for her closeness but she'd also give me what Carla couldn't.

I tore myself out of my thoughts when I realized how worriedly Giovanni watched me. "Are you all right?"

“Of course,” I said. “Valentina and I are excited about becoming parents.”

He narrowed his eyes in thought. “Are you sure everything is all right? Is it about the baby? Is it a girl?”

I grimaced. “Even if it were a girl, I’d be happy. The child is fine.”

Was it? I hadn’t talked to Valentina about our child yet, had never accompanied her to the doctor. Fuck. I was a goddamn bastard.

“How about we focus on business now? Rocco will be here soon.”

Giovanni nodded slowly, but I could tell that he wasn’t happy with me. That made two of us.



I’d been buried in work all day, and yet my thoughts had revolved around Valentina. The house was silent when I returned. Maybe Valentina was over at Bibiana. Maybe she was avoiding me like I avoided her. I needed to get past my pride, past my goddamn stubbornness and talk to my wife.

I stepped into my office and tensed when I found Valentina inside. The moment she turned around to me, I knew something was very wrong.

She looked heartbroken and close to tears. My insides turned to stone. Had something happened to the baby?

Relief flooded me when she told me about seeing Antonio, about his plot to have me killed. It was astonishing how disturbing news like that was still better than the alternative: than Val telling me something had happened to our baby. I could handle traitors. I couldn't handle losing our child.

When Valentina was done telling me about Antonio's plan, she was crying softly, her eyes searching mine almost desperately. I wiped the tears away with my thumb.

"You know what's strange?" she whispered thickly. "At one point, I thought I could never love someone as I loved Antonio, no matter how unrequited that love was. And today I'm condemning him to his death for another man who will never love me back."

My hand against Valentina's cheek stilled. I'd avoided considering the extent of my feelings for Val, preferred to shield myself from them. I'd been in love with everything Carla symbolized—piety, innocence, virtuousness, pure goodness—long before I'd loved her. Love had come over time and then it had burned so fiercely that it had almost incinerated me when it had been ripped from me. I never wanted to be caught up in something as destructive as love again. That showed my arrogance: thinking I was above the strongest human emotion, that I could decide not to love ever again.

"We shouldn't wait too long. Maybe he'll realize it was stupid to contact you and he'll decide to go back into

hiding. We need to reach him before that," I said, still fighting a battle I had already lost. So arrogant and prideful.

Valentina stepped out of my reach and I dropped my hand.

I needed to handle the traitors now. That was all I could focus on.



It was always easier to unleash your anger on others than on yourself, even if it was me whom I despised with a fiery passion.

I removed my jacket and rolled up my sleeves as I regarded Antonio and Raffaele bound to chairs in front of me. Stark terror reflected in their eyes and it was a beautifully satisfying sight.

I'd promised Valentina to end Antonio quickly, knowing I was lying. I couldn't spare him, not only because I needed the information he harbored but also because I needed to satisfy the dark hunger in my veins asking for blood, for pain, for screams.

Arturo stood back, reading my mood curiously. "You want to handle them?"

I inclined my head with a cold smile that made Raffaele squirm in his seat, then groan against the tape covering his mouth. His kneecaps were splintered but that wouldn't kill him. The shot wound in Antonio's stomach was a bigger

problem, but Arturo had bandaged it so he wouldn't bleed out too soon.

"For now," I said.

Arturo nodded and leaned against the wall. He'd only recently taken over from his father as Enforcer but he was a capable asset. He enjoyed the torture, which was always a helpful trait in our line of work. Yet sometimes I worried he enjoyed it a bit too much. One look at his eager dark eyes told me he was impatient for me to start. Right then, my own eyes probably held the same deranged need for bloodshed.

I let my gaze slide over the display of knives, scalpels and other utensils intended to make a traitor's last hours as agonizing as possible. Arturo always tested new utensils, disturbingly creative in his job.

I preferred ordinary torture methods. Unsheathing my knife, I stepped up to Antonio and ripped away the tape. He cried out. "Think of Val. She'd never want you to torture me," he croaked.

It was the wrong thing to say, reminding me of his connection to Val, of how he failed her like I'd failed her so far. Even knowing that he was gay, the thought of him kissing Val, of touching her sent a spear of jealous rage through me. I smiled and he began shaking. "Val won't ever find out, now will she?"

Antonio swallowed, his eyes darting to my Enforcer. If he hoped for help, he was very mistaken.

"You will tell me everything I want to know, every little detail, about this coup, about your fellow conspirators. But

first… about Val.”

Antonio’s eyes widened.

I had Raffaele to torture for information on the conspiracy, but Antonio was the only one who could help me understand my wife, the very essence of her being, and maybe my conflicting emotions for her.



I changed clothes before I returned home. The house was eerily silent when I stepped inside. Taft was in his guardhouse and Zita and Gabby must already have gone home. I headed up the staircase in search for Valentina. After the picture Antonio had painted about my wife, my guilt set even heavier on my shoulders. Val was a good woman, trying to help the people she loved with everything she had.

The sound of running water drew me into the bathroom and the sight before me broke through the dark clouds the torture had plastered over my soul. Val cowered in the shower, her legs pulled tightly to her chest as water rained down on her. Her hair was plastered to her shivering body. I stalked toward her and turned off the water, surprised to find it hot when Valentina’s goosebumps suggested she was cold.

I couldn’t explain what I felt looking down at my broken-hearted wife, at her anguish and sorrow. The tortured cries of

Antonio and Raffaele had done nothing to me but my wife's state tore at me.

I picked Valentina up and lifted her into my arms, feeling her shake against me. I wanted to protect her from all evil in this world, but the greatest of all evil were my own demons.

I set Val down, but she clung to me even as I dried her with a towel. She surprised me by burying her face in my neck, shuddering.

"Oh God," she whispered.

I lifted her once more and carried her over to the bed where I gently put her down before I stretched out beside her. Val's breathing was coming in harsh gasps, her eyes darting back and force as she succumbed to shock. I touched her cheeks, forcing her to look at me. "Shh, Val. It's okay."

"I killed him," she croaked over and over again.

"Val, look at me."

She did and the sorrow in her green eyes stirred emotions in me I hadn't felt in a long time. "You did what was right. You did what you had to do to protect me. I won't ever forget it. Never." I stroked her cheeks, meaning every word. Despite how horrible of a husband I'd been for Valentina, she'd chosen me.

"I told you that you could trust me."

"I know, and I do."

"Did you get the names of the other traitors?"

I nodded. "Yes. I'm fairly sure. Enzo and a few others are taking care of the less important rats right now."

“What…what did you do to Antonio?”

“He’s dead, Val.”

“I know, but what did you do to him?”

“If it’s any consolation for you, I focused my main attention on Raffaele. Antonio got a quicker death than any other traitor.” It wasn’t a lie. Raffaele suffered even more, but it wasn’t the truth Valentina had asked for. It was the one she deserved. She needed to be happy and I wouldn’t burden her with Antonio’s cruel death.

“Thank you.”

I regarded her pale face, her trembling lips, her wide eyes. “Val, you’re worrying me.”

Val kissed me, tasting of tears and her very own enticing sweetness. My brows pulled together, not sure what to make of her behavior. “Please,” she whispered. “Make love to me. Just today. I know you don’t love me. Pretend, just for tonight. Hold me in your arms for once.”

I had been fueled by self-hatred when I’d dealt with Antonio and Raffaele, but that was nothing in comparison to what I felt now. I deserved tenfold of the pain I’d caused them.

“God, Val,” I rasped and kissed her.

I shoved my self-hatred aside and focused on giving Val what she deserved, what I wanted to give her. For the first time, I allowed myself to take my time kissing Val, to pour my own need into her. Val softened under my touch as I caressed her shoulder, her arm and side, doing what I should have done the first time I’d taken her.

I got rid of my shirt and hugged Val to my chest, stroking her hair and kissing her face. I took my time stroking every inch of her smooth skin until I finally slipped my hand between her legs, finding her wet but not as aroused as usual. After a few minutes of kissing and caresses, Valentina was writhing beneath me and my own need called loudly to me, but I didn't let it deter me. This wasn't about my own desires. This was about my step toward redemption, redeeming myself toward my wife in the only way I was capable of at the moment. I undressed and molded our bodies together. I slid into Valentina slowly, watching her face closely, taking pleasure in the way her lips parted and she moaned.

I cupped her face, locking gazes before I started to move.

And this felt like a piece of my heart, which had been shattered at Carla's death, molded together, as if I could finally let the past drop, step for step, and allow Valentina into my heart where she belonged.

She was a beautiful, kind woman, one I didn't deserve, but I swore to myself to be a better husband, a better man for her.

"I should have made love to you before," I rasped, and my heart lurched realizing this was exactly that. Lovemaking. I was falling for Valentina. My body and heart were unable to resist her, and I'd fought this useless battle for far too long.

PART 8

During an early morning meeting with my captains—minus Tommaso who hadn't showed up—to discuss the traitor situation, my phone rang. It was one of the men I'd sent out to check on Tommaso. "Did you find him?"

"He's dead. We found him only in his underpants on the living room floor of his house. His wife freaked out on us."

"Where's she now?"

"Still in hysterics in the kitchen."

"Take her to her parents."

I hung up then called the doc and sent him over to take a look at the body. I knew what he'd find. I'd never asked Val to hand over the vial with poison that Antonio had given her. She must have given it to Bibiano so she could kill her husband.

Giovanni, Rocco and my Captains regarded me curiously. "Tommaso's been found dead."

"Did the traitors kill him?" Giovanni asked.

"We don't know yet. Let's postpone this meeting. We discussed the most important aspects of the matter. I need to deal with this."

I stood and everyone did the same.

I walked out of Rocco’s office and crossed the entrance hall. Steps rang out behind me. I turned. Rocco. “Did Antonio or Raffaele reveal plans to kill someone else?”

I gritted my teeth as I considered my reply. It would cast suspicion on Bibiana if Tommaso’s death couldn’t be linked to the coup. Val would be absolutely heartbroken if something happened to Bibiana. I wouldn’t hurt her. But she’d be shunned. She’d have to leave our circles at the very least, cast out from everything she knew.

“They mentioned that they had planned to kill more loyal followers but they died before I could extract more details from them.”

Rocco frowned. I was usually good at making sure people remained alive long enough to reveal all their secrets, but yesterday had been a catastrophic day and even I wasn’t beyond failure. Hopefully that would placate him. He nodded, but his eyes remained curious.

On my way back home, the doc called, telling me what I’d suspected: Tommaso had been poisoned.

The moment I saw Val, anger rose in me. She should have confided in me before doing something this foolish. If Bibiana had acted suspicious, Tommaso might have anticipated her plan and killed her in a rage. She would have revealed Val’s involvement under duress and then I’d have to deal with Tommaso to keep Val out of the line of fire. Not that the current situation was much better.

“Valentina, I’d like to talk to you,” I gritted out and stalked into my office, glaring out of the window.

Val’s heels clicked on the floor. I turned around to her. Worry swam in her eyes. She was a clever woman. She knew something was off.

“Tommaso didn’t show up at the meeting today.”

Val actually played dumb, something that didn’t suit her at all. She tried to deny everything, which was futile. When she realized she couldn’t fool me she finally admitted to giving Bibiana the poison without a flicker of remorse. “I would do it again. I don’t regret freeing Bibi of that cruel bastard. I only regret that I had to go behind your back, but you left me no choice.”

“I left you no choice? You can’t go around killing my men!”

“He deserved it. You should have seen what he did to Bibi. You should have wanted to kill him for how he treated an innocent woman, wife or not.”

“If I killed every man in the Outfit who treated women badly, I’d be left with half of my soldiers. This is a life of brutality and cruelty, and many soldiers don’t understand that as Made Men we should protect our family from it, and not unleash our anger on them. They know I don’t approve of their actions. That’s all I can do.” It was a sad truth. I despised many of my men for how they treated their wives. In fights I usually made sure to save these men last, but I couldn’t outright kill them.

“But I was handed the chance to do something, and I did.”

“You helped a wife murder her husband. Some men in my position would find it unsettling to be with a woman who doesn’t hesitate to use poison.”

“I gave Bibi a chance, a choice. That doesn’t mean I would kill you. I would fight you if you ever treated me like Tommaso did with Bibi. Tommaso preyed on Bibi’s weakness. She was given to that old bastard when she was only eighteen, and she never knew how to defend herself against him. He’s had four years to be a better man, to treat her decently. He failed. Our marriage has nothing to do with theirs. You don’t need to beat and rape me to feel like a man, and I wouldn’t let you. And anyway, I’m not vengeful, or I wouldn’t have swallowed how you treated me the last few months, how you accused me of cheating. And Bibi never loved Tommaso, so…”

I had to look away from Val’s eyes for a moment. Her love for me…I didn’t want to be confronted with it now. Things were complicated as it was.

“I’m not worried that you’d poison me. As I said before, I trust you. But I’ll have to investigate Tommaso’s death.”

“You won’t punish Bibi, will you? Please, Dante, if you care about me at all, you’ll rule that Tommaso’s murder was related to the traitors and that Bibi is innocent. She’s gone through too much already.”

“There might be people out there who won’t believe Bibiana wasn’t involved in Tommaso’s death, for exactly the reasons you stated before. She had reason to hate him. She had reason to kill him.”

“Then blame it on me. I could have done it behind Bibi’s back to help her.”

“And then what?”

“Then you punish me and not her.”

“And what if punishment for such a crime would be death in turn? Eye for an eye, Valentina.”

“Don’t hurt Bibi. Just don’t. Without me, she would have never found a way to kill him. It was as much my fault as it was hers. I will share whatever punishment you inflict on her.”

As if I’d ever hurt Val. My feelings for her would always prevent that. Punishing Bibiana would hurt Val. They were best friends. Val was fragile in her pregnant state. I didn’t want to cause her distress, not more than I had already caused her with my cold demeanor. She deserved happiness and love. While I wasn’t sure if I could give her the latter, I’d do my best to ensure the first.

Tommaso had been a loyal soldier. He deserved my protection. My oath as Capo entailed protecting the Outfit and my men. Letting others poison them most definitely broke my vow. Val’s eyes begged me. I couldn’t deny her, even if it meant betraying the Outfit. I’d keep Bibiana’s secret.

For Val.

After my interrogation of Bibiana and finding her innocent, Val and I were on our way home. Rocco and even Giovanni had been suspicious. Bibiana’s story didn’t completely add up but my judgment was final and neither of

my men would risk my wrath for someone like Tommaso. He hadn't left anyone behind who actually missed him. That was my luck.

Val put her hand on my leg, smiling in relief. She was grateful for what I'd done. Her eyes shone brightly.

"Thank you for helping Bibi."

"I did it for you." I had hidden Bibiana's involvement for Val, like I'd risked discontent among my men when I'd allowed her to work. I'd betrayed the Outfit's interests for Carla and now I was doing the same for Val. How much further would I go for her?

Would I regret betraying the Outfit for Val? I doubted it. I'd never regretted my previous betrayals. Val was worth betraying my oath for.



During our next meeting, Giovanni and I listened as Rocco recounted what he'd gathered on the current mood among our soldiers after we'd found the traitors. A situation like this could either spiral out of control because my men considered me open for attack or it would solidify my power. Tommaso's death had been an additional risk, one I shouldn't have taken upon myself. Despite his disgusting nature, he'd been well liked among the Captains and soldiers because of his tendency to offer them free whores.

His death had caused the most rumors, the most discord. It could have split the Outfit if the truth had gotten out.

Rocco was still suspicious. He was too cunning not to suspect something. He hadn't been present during the torture so he was unaware of the details of the conspiracy. Maybe he would even have hidden the truth like he'd done with Jacopo but I had absolutely no intention of trusting him with another of my secrets.

Arturo knew that neither Raffaele nor Antonio had mentioned Tommaso as part of their plot, but his focus was very single-minded. As long as I allowed him to torture and kill, occasionally even an Outsider that rubbed him the wrong way, he was well entertained and not a threat. Rocco, too, wouldn't investigate. He had everything he desired.

Things seemed to have gone smoothly, and yet I couldn't help but feel a sense of foreboding.

"Help! Help!"

Rocco fell silent. I jumped up without hesitation, drawing my gun as I stormed out of my office. Rocco and Giovanni were close behind me.

The moment I saw Valentina cradling her belly, pure fear surged through me. I stormed toward her, pushing my gun away. "Valentina? What's happening?"

"It's nothing. I didn't want to disturb your meeting."

Valentina's swaying betrayed her words for what they were, a lie. I steadied her and registered the fluid turning her pants darker. The baby.

Valentina could lose this baby before I'd ever told her how happy I was about her pregnancy. Because of me. Because of what I'd put her through?

Giovanni hurried toward us, his face reflecting the worry that threatened to paralyze me. "Valentina?"

"We need to get her to a hospital," Bibiana said sharply.

I lifted Valentina into my arms.

"Your shirt. You're getting it dirty."

As if I gave a damn. I got us into my car and instructed Enzo and Taft to drive ahead, then I rushed off toward the hospital.

Valentina was in pain and there was nothing I could do about it, nothing but get her help as fast as possible. "We should have put a towel on the seat. I'm getting it wet," she said.

Valentina's skin was pale, her brows drawn together in concern and pain. "I don't give a fuck about the seat, or the car, or anything right now. You are all that matters." I needed to touch her, to feel her warm skin and assure myself that she'd still be there tomorrow. I clutched her hand. "We're almost there. Are you in pain?"

"It's not as bad as before. It is your baby, Dante. I never cheated and I never will."

My suspicion became horrible reality at Valentina's words. "Is that the reason for this?"

Val regarded me curiously. "You think my water broke because I was upset with you?"

“I don’t know.” I’d never forgive myself if Val lost our kid. “I’m a fucking bastard, Val. If you lose this child…”

Val squeezed my hand as if I was the one who needed reassurance. The moment we arrived at the hospital, doctors rushed toward the car. They threw me nervous glances, knowing full well who I was.

I followed them inside but stayed in the hallway when they rolled Valentina into a treatment room. She gave me another encouraging smile. The moment she was gone, I ran a hand through my hair and released a harsh breath. “Fuck.”

Enzo hurried my way. “We’re keeping an eye on the doors for suspicious activities, boss.” He paused, regarding me. A hint of compassion showed in his brown eyes. “Is she all right?”

“The doctors are checking on her now.”

“I’m sure she and the baby will be fine.”

I gave a terse nod, not willing to show how much this unsettled me. Enzo nodded and turned around. I was glad to be alone, even if it gave me time for self-hatred once more. Soon Giovanni and Livia rushed down the corridor toward me. Val’s mother cried openly and Giovanni had to steady her with an arm around her shoulder. When they arrived at my side, Livia hugged me tightly. I touched her back. Giovanni gave me an apologetic smile. “How is she?” he asked.

“And what about the baby?” Livia pulled back but kept clutching my arms.

“I haven’t had a chance to talk to the doctors yet. They’re still treating Val.”

Livia sniffled. “God, I can’t bear the thought of our sweet Val losing her baby.”

“She won’t,” I said firmly.

Giovanni pried Livia away from me and pressed her to his side. “Everything will be fine, Livia.”

The door to the treatment room opened and one of the doctors stepped out followed by the second. They exchanged a look then one of them hurried off, leaving his colleague to deal with us. His expression made it obvious how reluctant he was.

“Is the baby okay?” Livia blurted before he could say something. Giovanni squeezed her shoulder in warning but she had eyes only for the doctor.

The doctor turned to me. “You’re her husband?”

“Yes, paint me the full picture. Don’t sugarcoat anything.”

He winced at my tone. “Your wife suffered a preterm rupture of membranes. She and the baby are well, but for it to stay that way she needs to rest as much as possible.”

Giovanni smiled at his wife, their relief blatant.

Once the doctor had given me clear instructions on how to proceed, he left.

“Go ahead,” Giovanni said. “I’m sure you and Val want some time to yourself.”

I stepped into the room. Val looked pale, but smiled softly at me. I promised myself to protect her and the baby

at any cost, to work toward giving Val what she deserved.



As expected, Val couldn’t go full term. Six weeks before the calculated due date, I took her to the hospital for a C-section. I’d made sure that only the best doctors and nurses were present. I wouldn’t allow anything to go wrong. It was almost eight weeks too early and even though the doctors assured me that Anna was in good health under the circumstances, I worried.

I clutched Val’s hand during the surgery and she held my gaze.

And then the first cry rang out. Val’s eyes widened and I squeezed her hand and kissed her knuckles.

A nurse came around with a small baby covered in blood and grime. So small and helpless. My daughter. Our daughter. It was difficult to grasp and yet a sensation I hadn’t thought possible washed through me: a feeling of arrival. As if in this moment I’d finally shaken off the shackles of the past and could really live in the present with my wife and daughter.

Val released me. “Go to our daughter. Go.”

Val was weak and needed my support as much as our daughter did. I needed to be there for them both from this day until I took my last breath. It would be the biggest challenge of my life.

After pressing a kiss to Val’s forehead, I stood and headed toward the nurse. I briefly glanced toward Val’s open belly and the amount of blood around it. The doctor lowered his eyes and continued his work.

I followed the nurse and watched as she measured Anna. She cried pitifully, her tiny arms flailing.

“She’s healthy. 16.7 inches and 3.83 pounds. Do you want to hold her?”

I nodded and then finally I held my daughter for the very first time. She was much smaller than any baby I’d ever held and it fired up my protectiveness. I stroked her cheek, marveling at my feelings toward this small human. How could love be born this quickly?

I glanced over to Val who watched with tearful eyes. My love for her hadn’t been born in a single heartbeat but it didn’t burn less fiercely I realized now. I walked over to Val and showed her our daughter.

“Anna,” Val said. “Your dad will always love you and keep you safe.”

Words lingered on my tongue, words I should have said before but again they got stuck in my throat. I kissed Anna then Val. “You and Anna, both.”

Val gave me a knowing smile. Maybe she did indeed realize that I loved her. One day I’d tell her. I only needed to shake off that tiny strand still anchoring me to my guilt, to my vow to Carla.

PART 9

I didn’t leave Valentina’s side until the next day when she’d recovered a bit from the surgery and her parents visited. Anna was in the ICU to make sure she got enough oxygen and was under surveillance 24/7. Val was determined to visit her today but her C-section wound would make this difficult.

Giovanni surprised me with a hug when he stepped into the room. “I’m so happy for you two.”

I nodded. Livia headed straight toward Val who lay in bed but looked impatient to get out.

“I’ll have to give my father a call.”

Giovanni went over to Val and embraced her. Seeing Val being cared for, I stepped outside and called my father back. I’d sent him and Pietro a quick message yesterday telling them about Anna, and while Pietro had immediately congratulated me and Val, Father hadn’t replied.

“Father, what is it?” I said in an as neutral a tone as I was capable of knowing what he’d say.

“It’s a shame,” he mused. “But maybe next time you’ll finally be gifted an heir. You shouldn’t wait too long to try for a second child.”

I gritted my teeth against the anger boiling up. Val had only just suffered through a C-section and Anna would need weeks to catch up, but he already wished for another child. “I’m happy with the child Valentina gifted me yesterday. Your granddaughter is beautiful and doing well, considering the circumstances.”

“That’s good. Your mother sends her regards.”

I made a non-committal noise. “Will you come to visit?”

“You know how your mother can get when she’s in a hospital. We’ll wait until the child is home.”

I hung up shortly after and took a deep breath as I loosened my hold on my phone. I wouldn’t allow my parents to diminish the joy I felt over having Anna.

The phone rang again. As usual, Ines had the perfect timing.

“I’m so happy for you! Congratulations from Pietro and me. We’re so excited for you!”

“Thank you. Pietro already sent me your congrats.”

“Per message! That’s not enough. I’m so happy for you. I wish I could hug you and Valentina. How’s Anna? Is she all right?”

I smiled slightly at Ines’ excitement. She was usually more poised. “The doctors are happy with her. She’s breathing on her own and she’s well developed for a preemie.”

“Wonderful,” she said softly. “We’d love to come visit. It’s been too long. I know you’re busy now but maybe Pietro and I can come over with the kids next week? We’d even stay

with Mother and Father if you'd rather have the house to yourself."

"No, you're welcome in our house. Last time Father didn't appreciate the boisterous nature of the twins."

Ines huffed. "They're only eight, of course they're a bit wild. Let me guess, he didn't congratulate you on your daughter?"

"You know how they are," I said.

"So Mother did what she does best and just followed Father's example." She made a small disgruntled noise. "I'm glad you got yourself a wife with her own head. I think it's exactly what you need."

"That's what you think?"

"Yes. You need someone who draws you out of your shell and occasionally kicks your prideful Capo behind."

My mouth twitched. "You think I'd allow anyone to do that." Serafina and Samuel screamed in the background, followed by Sofia's cry.

"Wonderful, they woke the baby."

"Take care of your children."

"And you of yours and your wife."

I returned into the room where Valentina perched on the edge of the bed, her face twisting in pain. Giovanni gave me a worried look. I rolled the wheelchair over then helped Val into it. "You can't walk all the way to the ICU yet."

Val's face made it clear that she was unhappy with her body's refusal to obey her command. Sometimes she could be as prideful and stubborn as me.

Seeing Anna in the incubator with all the monitors tracking her vital functions, my heart squeezed tightly. A nurse hurried over to us and lifted Anna out of the incubator then put her down on Val's chest. Val beamed up at me then her parents. Livia started crying once more. Giovanni leaned down and lightly touched Anna's hand. "Those small fingers…"

Val hadn't only been a good choice because of who she was, but also because of her parents. Giovanni was a man I liked and could trust to some extent. And Livia would be a far more loving grandmother than my own mother could ever be.

"I think we'll give you some time now," Giovanni said after a few minutes. Once he and Livia were gone, I pulled up a chair beside Val and stroked Anna's cheek. "Did the doctors tell you how long she'll have to stay here?" she asked, not looking up from our girl.

"Two to three weeks. She's a fighter, so despite her early start they are confident she'll be strong enough to come home with us soon."

"Good. I want her home with us. I feel safer in our house."

I kissed Val's temple. "You are safe, Val. My men are watching every entrance. They patrol the corridors, and I'm at your side."

Val glanced up with a soft smile. "Why don't you hold her for a bit?"

I nodded then carefully lifted Anna from Val’s chest and cradled her to my own before I reclined on the chair. Val watched us, her eyes glassy. I linked our fingers and squeezed gently. She needed to know that this meant as much to me as it meant to her, even if I didn’t express it in the same way.



Three weeks later, Anna could finally come home with us. I carried her into our mansion because Val still wasn’t allowed to carry anything heavy.

Zita and Gabby waited in the lobby, obviously curious. They hadn’t seen our daughter yet because we’d kept visitors to an absolute minimum. Only Ines and Pietro with the kids and Bibiana had visited beside Val’s parents.

Zita came closer with a motherly smile. “She’s precious.”

Val nodded. “She is.” They exchanged a smile. Their initial animosity had turned to mutual respect, thanks to Val’s patience.

Gabby slowly approached, as usual shy around me. “She’s so small.”

“She’ll grow quickly,” I said. I held the carrier out to Zita who took it at once so I could help Val out of her coat. She still moved a bit stiffly but she was trying to mask her pain from me.

“Your father called, Master,” Zita said as I took the carrier once more. My mouth tightened. “He and your mother want to come over for dinner to meet their grandchild.”

Val raised her eyebrows. She had pretended not to mind my parents’ disinterest for our daughter but I wasn’t blind.

“I wasn’t sure what to do but I bought everything for a grand feast just in case,” Zita said, glancing between Val and me.

I tried to control my anger. Val brushed my arm, giving me a smile, and some of my fury evaporated. “Please prepare something delicious, Zita. We’ll have them over.”

Zita nodded but regarded me questioningly as if she waited for me to confirm. I gave a terse nod.

“Let’s take Anna upstairs.”

Zita and Gabby headed into the kitchen while Val and I moved upstairs. Taking the steps, Val’s face flashed with discomfort but she quickly masked it when she noticed my gaze on her.

Once Anna was settled in her crib, I touched Val’s shoulders. “Val, don’t hide your pain from me. You can lean on me. I need to know when you’re hurt.”

She leaned into me with a shuddering sigh and I cupped her head. She swallowed hard, obviously fighting tears. “These last few weeks were a lot to handle. I’m just happy that Anna’s finally home, and I’m mad at my body for taking so long to recover. I want to be the controlled woman you expect.”

I drew back with a frown. “You are everything I want, Val, trust me. Your body went through so much. You gave me a daughter. Give yourself time to heal. I want you healthy and happy, that’s all I require you to be right now.”

She nodded. “You’re right. I just don’t feel like myself recently. It’s hormones and the changes in my body. I need time to get used to all of this.”

“Maybe it’s for the best to tell my parents we don’t have time to have them over tonight. Neither of them will have a positive effect on your health.”

“I know they’re not happy that I didn’t give you an heir.” My hands on her tightened. “But their disappointment can’t hurt me, Dante. All that matters is us. That we are happy, and I’m delirious with joy whenever I look at Anna.”

“Me too,” I said, kissing her. Before Val, my life had been dominated by duty and controlled by the past. Joy had been an abstract concept of no consequence for me. But slowly, it was becoming part of my existence once more. Her happiness kindled my own. I didn’t regret my betrayal of the Outfit, even if I should have.

It was my duty to put the Outfit first, to eliminate any threat to my power and the Outfit’s unity. Hiding that Bibiana had killed her husband didn’t serve either purpose. It wasn’t the logical, the dutiful, the necessary choice. This was pure emotional ruling. After seeing Val heartbroken over Antonio, I didn’t want to shatter her completely by having to punish her best friend. So I lied and deceived. My men. The Outfit. My vow. Everything. For Valentina.

Did she even realize what kind of sacrifice that was? If she knew, she'd realize that I didn't have to fake lovemaking anymore.

PART 10

Valentina

We spent our first anniversary at home because Anna was still small and the last few months had been tiring. But Zita had prepared a three-course dinner for us and took over watching Anna while Dante and I enjoyed our meal. We sat close beside each other and talked about Anna and our plans to spend a few weeks in Tuscany in summer.

It was a relaxed, intimate evening. I was actually glad that we hadn't gone out to a fancy restaurant for dinner. When we were in public, Dante always had to keep up his mask. He wasn't the same man then that he was when we were alone. His outside appearance reminded me too much of the withdrawn man of the beginning of our marriage. I preferred his warmer, more approachable private side, one he hid so carefully and only showed to the people he trusted.

“I really love this,” I said after I finished a delicious piece of fig tart tatin, a fancy French dessert that tasted like heaven.

Dante tilted his head with a small smile. “The dessert or your gift?”

I laughed, twisting my arm around to see the emeralds in my bracelet catch the candlelight. “Both. But I was actually referring to our celebration.”

Dante ran his thumb over my knuckles, obviously surprised. “I thought you might expect a bigger celebration for the occasion.”

“No,” I said firmly. “I think this is a concept for the future even when Anna is older and won’t need us close by. I like that it’s just us, no prying eyes.”

Understanding took over Dante’s expression and he pressed a kiss to my hand. “I have to admit I prefer not to share the stunning sight of you in this dress.”

A pleased smile broke free on my face. I leaned toward him. “Are you turning into a flatterer?”

“No, flattering, only the honest truth,” he said in a low voice and a look in his eyes I could feel right between my legs.

I swallowed. “Well, I don’t like to share you with all the gawking women either.”

Dante chuckled. “Now you exaggerate.”

I gave him a look. “I have eyes and so have you. Power and money are the embodiment of sex-appeal, and you combine them with a six-pack. It’s ridiculous.”

Dante stood, holding out his hand in a silent command. “If I didn’t know better, I’d say you’ve had too much to drink. Let’s get you to bed.”

I pushed to my feet with a teasing smile. “I’m not tired.” It was a lie, of course. Anna had kept us awake the last few nights.

Dante pressed a hot kiss to my throat. “You won’t sleep.”

His fingers linked with mine as he led me upstairs.

I’d never grow tired of Dante’s body on top of mine, of him making love to me. Those were the moments I felt the most connected to him and could sense how much he wanted to tell me but couldn’t.

Afterward, we headed into Anna’s nursery. Zita had trouble calming her, and I just wanted to be with my little girl. I cradled her to my chest, kissing her chubby cheeks. Dante watched with a tender expression I’d never grow tired of seeing.

I pressed a kiss to Anna’s forehead. I just couldn’t stop loving on her.

“I love you,” Dante said quietly, almost hesitantly.

I smiled. “Do you hear, Anna? Your daddy loves you.”

Dante touched my cheek, bringing my attention to him and shook his head. “That’s not what I meant, even if it’s true. I love *you*, Val.”

I sucked in a sharp breath, staring at him in a state of shock. I’d made my peace with the fact that Dante couldn’t say the words. It had hurt occasionally but this was something I couldn’t demand.

Regret showed on Dante’s face as he leaned down, his gaze penetrating mine almost desperately. “Haven’t you known? I tried to show it. I obviously didn’t do a good job.”

I tried to get a grip on myself, swallowing hard. “No. You showed your feelings and I gathered that you loved me, but hearing the actual words…” A few embarrassing tears slid down my cheeks. Anna blinked sleepily up at us.

Dante looked like I’d mortally wounded him. He cupped my head and pulled me in for a harsh kiss. “I promise to tell you often from now on. But even if I don’t always voice my emotions aloud, you must know that I love Anna and you more than anything else. You are my future.”

“And your present,” I said with a small teasing smile.

“My everything,” he rasped, and I couldn’t imagine ever being happier than in this moment.

THE FOURTH BETRAYAL

About three years later

PART 1

Dante

I rubbed my temples, trying to ignore the hints of a headache throbbing at the back of my head. Since I'd declared war on the Famiglia a few months ago after Liliana ran off with Luca's soldier Romero and they killed one of my men, I hadn't slept more than a few hours per night. I wanted to be a father to Anna who seemed to grow every day but for me to have time for my little girl during the day I needed to work at night.

Soon I'd have another child to take care of, not to mention that Valentina needed my support raising two small kids. I didn't have any illusions about our future relationship with the Famiglia. After everything that had happened, peace was out of the question. This war would soon become bloodier and more brutal, and I needed to make sure that my family was safe.

My phone flashed with a message from Enzo. I scanned it quickly and stilled, then read it once more.

I think Aria's in town. She's in the restaurant.

A few seconds later a photo followed. It was taken from a bad angle and obviously half hidden but I recognized Aria's face at once. Even her dark wig couldn't distract from her extraordinary facial features.

"What's the matter?" Rocco asked carefully.

I considered what to tell him. Aria was his daughter and her appearance here in Chicago in a time of war was a major shock. She was Luca's weakness, his absolutely greatest weakness.

Should I grab her? She and Val were in the restroom together. Val's back out but I think they might meet again.

Why had Aria contacted Val? And more importantly, would Val tell me? I really hoped she would. She was my wife. Her loyalty should be for me, not for her cousin, no matter how close they'd been.

YES

I lifted my gaze to Rocco. He was frowning at me, worried. He never talked about his daughters anymore. They were dead to him. It was difficult for me to understand. I couldn't imagine ever hating Anna like he seemed to despise his daughters. Of course, Anna would be bound by certain rules like all of us were and I hoped she wouldn't break them, wouldn't put me in a position that I'd have to force her to bow to them.

Rocco was my Consigliere and he was still Aria's father. Keeping her appearance from him could cause an uproar if word got out after all. I wasn't sure what Aria was planning,

so it wasn’t unlikely that she’d draw unwanted attention to herself very quickly. Her face was too well known in Chicago. “Enzo just told me about a possible sighting of Aria in Chicago.”

Rocco stiffened in his chair, his eyes widening. “Luca would never allow her to leave his territory.”

“True,” I said. Luca was very controlling when it came to his wife, and every other aspect of his life as well. “I think she might have acted on her own.”

Rocco stared off past me for a couple of moments, his mouth tight. “What about Gianna? I can’t imagine Aria coming up with this idiocy on her own. It must have been Gianna’s idea. She’s always caused trouble.”

I didn’t say anything. Marrying Aria off to Luca was meant to bring peace, but in the long run, the bond had led to so many unfortunate events that had plunged us into a more brutal war than before. “I don’t have detailed intel yet.”

“Did Enzo capture her?”

“I don’t think so. He hasn’t reported back to my order yet. I need to know what she’s up to and if she’s contacting people. You know how long we’ve been looking for the traitor among our own. Maybe she’ll lead us straight to him.”

Rocco nodded. “Capturing the mule is our utmost priority.”

“Will you be able to advise me in this without your emotions getting in the way? I need to be very strategic about this. Revenge takes time and shouldn’t be forced.”

Rocco smiled thinly. “Don’t worry. My only interest is the Outfit. Aria’s a pawn, not more.”

I tilted my head. He sounded certain but I wondered if he wasn’t hiding his true feelings. He certainly desired revenge for the embarrassment his daughters had caused him in his eyes.

“Very well.”

“Once we have her in our hand, Luca will completely lose his mind. He’s obsessed with her. My daughters have a talent to drive men crazy. He’ll do anything we ask, he’ll risk anything, give us anything if we hurt her.”

I leaned back, trying to predict how Luca might react. What would I do if Valentina was in his hands? The mere thought drove me up the wall. I’d do anything to protect Val, to get her back. Would I give in to Luca’s demands? Would I trust him to keep up his part of the bargain? I wasn’t sure. I didn’t trust Luca in the slightest. The only other option would be an attack and try to free Val with sheer brutality. It would be dangerous and considering that it would happen in Luca’s territory unlikely to succeed.

But Luca was even less restrained than me. The second I told him I had Aria he’d be driven by emotions, fury and love equally, and would raise an army to attack Chicago. He would leave a bloody trail. I couldn’t see how he’d go out of this weaker unless I managed to kill him, but until then he’d kill hundreds of my men. And even if I killed Aria, that wouldn’t destroy the Famiglia, it would only make Luca completely unpredictable, unhinged and far more dangerous

than he was now. If I was being honest, those strategic thoughts weren't the only reason why I was hesitant to keep Aria as a captive. Harming an innocent woman went against my convictions, and not just that, part of me actually felt a sliver of obligation to protect Aria from harm. I'd thrust her into the arms of a monster to silence the Golden Couple enthusiasts and avoid marrying close after Carla's death. Even if Luca treated her well, I didn't know that back then. I sacrificed an innocent girl for my own selfish reasons. The idea of doing that again, of keeping Aria a captive, disgusted me. Those weren't considerations I should entertain as Capo. Only the Outfit should be my concern.

"You intend to capture her and blackmail Luca with her wellbeing and life, I assume?" Rocco said when I'd been silent for too long.

"I'll definitely capture her. What I'll do with her once I have her, that's still uncertain. I don't want word about this to get out."

"We need to figure out what to do with Aria. Luca is a dangerous opponent, especially when provoked."

"He is, which is why I don't think keeping Aria as a captive is the most promising plan."

Rocco opened his mouth as if to protest but I raised my hand. He probably would have voiced valid objections, but it didn't matter. I considered alternative options. I couldn't just let her go. The Outfit needed to profit from her mistake, or my men would mutiny.

“We need to drive a wedge between them, to destroy them from within. If Luca’s marriage breaks apart, the people in the Famiglia who were against a bond with an Outfit woman will rise.”

Rocco narrowed his eyes in thought, then nodded. “Emotional warfare is an option. Luca is raving jealous when it comes to Aria. Maybe he thinks it’s love, but it’s pure ownership. He’d defend his territory at any cost, the East and Aria both. If he thought Aria wasn’t as angelic as he considers her to be, if he feels betrayed by her, he could become an easy target.”

“You want to stage an affair? With whom?”

“Have you ever seen Luca’s expression when someone brought the Golden Couple rumor up?”

“No.”

“Dante, Luca hates you. You are his enemy, another predator who wants his prey. It would unravel any semblance of humanity he’s put up. The mere idea that you could touch what he considers his will destroy him. This could be our first step toward victory.”

It could be, or it could spiral this war completely out of control. Only time could tell.

After my encounter with Aria in the restroom, I headed back to Bibiana and Luisa, holding Anna's hand tightly. Enzo gave me a curious look, obviously worried because I had spent so long in the restroom. I hoped Anna would play along and keep Aria's appearance a secret. If she let something slip around Enzo, I wouldn't be able to stop him from capturing my cousin and delivering her to Dante.

God, Dante. How was I supposed to keep this from him?

I couldn't tell him though. The war with the Famiglia wouldn't give him any choice but to use Aria against Luca, especially when Rocco found out. Maybe he was a clever strategic genius, but I didn't like him. Since he married that young girl, less than ever. His desire for the girl had ultimately caused the debacle with Liliana.

I sank down across from Bibi who looked up from the drawing Luisa was doing and frowned. She knew me well. I glanced toward Enzo and gave him a tight smile because he still hovered close to me instead of taking his seat beside Taft. He finally retreated and sat down. My eyes darted to the restroom door, wondering when Aria would emerge, but I didn't dare focusing my attention there.

Bibi raised an eyebrow. "What's wrong?"

Her voice was a bare whisper.

"Nothing." Then I mouthed, "Later."

"Nothing," Anna echoed with wide theatrical eyes before she smiled proudly at me. I kissed her hair. Louisa grinned at Anna who hopped off the bench and headed over to her

friend so they could draw together. Those two were too cute together.

“How are things with your parents?” I asked softly, needing to change the topic before Anna’s excitement got the better of her, or my worry drove me crazy.

Bibi sighed. “They are very unhappy that I’m still unmarried. It’s scandalous in their eyes. They’ve been talking to Rocco. They think Dante needs to stop putting a hand over me. It’s family, not Capo business.” She gave an apologetic smile. “I hope he doesn’t get in trouble because of me.”

“He won’t,” I said firmly. It had taken a long time for Bibi to recover from Tommaso’s abuse. She hadn’t been interested in being with another man, much less someone her parents chose for her again. They’d given her to a monster the first time. I doubted their taste had improved. They were despicable human beings. “Have you considered going on a date? Getting to know someone?”

Bibi’s eyes widened in shock. “You know how it is. It would be a scandal. Even if I were okay with the backlash, I don’t want Luisa to get problems because of me.” She’d lowered her voice and leaned over the table so her daughter wouldn’t hear her but Luisa and Anna were busy anyway.

I touched her hand. “You act like I want you to become some kind of scarlet woman.”

Bibi snorted, and I smiled. “I mean why not go on dates with possible suitors. Or do you prefer to stay alone?”

Bibi sighed, looking embarrassed. “I want to marry. I want love and everything you have with Dante. But I’m not sure it’s something I can ever have.”

“Of course, you’ll have it.” I paused. “Someone asked me about you. If you were already promised anew, or if you might be up to get to know him.”

Bibi stared at me as if I’d told her earth was a disc. “Really? I mean… who?”

I smiled at her reaction. Enzo got up and scouted the restaurant and street once more. I tensed, wondering if Aria was already gone. I hadn’t dared look in the direction of the restrooms to check if she’d left. I hoped she’d change her mind and take the first flight back to New York instead of meeting me tonight.

“Val?” Bibi asked.

I blinked, returning my attention to her. “Oh, Dario Fabbri. You have met him at social gatherings…”

“The head of Dante’s legal team?”

I nodded. “Yes. He’s very intelligent, very poised, and looks quite nice, don’t you think?”

Bibi flushed a deep red. “I never looked at him that closely.”

I gave her a look.

She smiled sheepishly. “He’s nice to look at. He isn’t promised?”

“He focused on his career so far, and as the third son of a Captain, it’s not really that important to be married. His

brothers already have more than enough children to carry on the family name."

"How old is he?"

I frowned. I wasn't entirely sure. "Maybe thirty?"

"He really asked about me?"

"Don't be so shocked. You're beautiful, Bibi, and since he-who-shall-not-be-named doesn't suck the life out of you anymore, you've got curves in all the right places."

"But I've been married before. Surely, he'd rather have a younger, more innocent bride."

I rolled my eyes. "Maybe he's like Dante and wants a woman close to him in age with a little experience in life. Who knows? Why don't you find out for yourself? Meet him."

Bibi bit her lip. "Maybe I should do it, but can you be there? I don't think I can meet him alone yet."

"I'll be your chaperone, Bibi. No hanky-panky until I say so."

Bibi burst out laughing, causing Anna and Luisa to look up, surprised.

My heart felt lighter after this. Being with Bibi and Luisa always cheered me up, no matter what had been before, which is why I met Bibi at least once a week, and right now every second day.

After saying goodbye to Bibi and Luisa, Anna and I got into the back of the car with Enzo and Taft in the front. Enzo gave me a searching look through the rearview mirror and I wondered why. "Home now?" Enzo asked.

"Yes, please. I'm tired."

I cradled my belly. Anna rested her ear on my bump, looking up at me with wide blue eyes. “Is he dancing again?”

I smiled. Leonas had been very wild lately, which led to sleepless nights and back pain, but I only had a few more weeks to go. “He’s asleep now.”

Anxiety tightened my insides when I returned to the mansion. Dante came out of his office and Anna rushed toward him like usual and flung herself into his arms. He lifted her up and pressed her to his chest. Then he walked toward me and kissed me. “Everything okay?” he asked.

For a moment, I thought he knew about Aria but then I told myself that I was being ridiculous. He always asked how I was. I was practically bursting by now. “Leonas and I are fine.”

“How was your lunch with Bibi?”

“Wonderful.”

“Luisa and I painted a jungle. And a tiger, and an elephant! And Mommy and I played hide and seek with—”

“Luisa and Bibi. It was so much fun,” I said then added quickly. “Oh, and I convinced Bibi to go out with Dario. You said I don’t have to worry about her with him, right?”

Dante set Anna down who darted away toward the kitchen, probably to beg Zita and Gabby for sweets.

“From what I know of him, he isn’t a man who’d abuse a woman.”

Something about Dante’s gaze had me worried. “Is something the matter?”

He shook his head. “Plenty to do.”

I smiled. “Will you meet with the Captains tonight as usual?”

“That’s the plan, unless you need me home?”

He searched my face.

I shook my head. “No, I’ll probably watch my favorite series and then go to bed early if Anna allows it.”

“All right,” he said then kissed me again before he returned to his office.

Guilt slashed through me. I’d lied to his face.



I should have known Dante would find out. Since the start of the war, he’d been even more careful, more vigilant. Now it was too late. I’d unknowingly led Aria into a trap.

My heart beat frantically as I hurried out of the Santa Fe. I threw a last glance over my shoulder through the wide windows of the restaurant where Aria and Dante were sitting. What was he going to do to her? Dante despised hurting women, and he’d known Aria all her life. I couldn’t imagine him causing her harm. I had to trust in that.

Enzo was waiting for me behind the steering wheel of his car and I slipped into the backseat, cradling my belly.

He started the engine at once and drove off. He’d told Dante about Aria. He hadn’t asked me about it. This showed me once more that ultimately I had only very few people to

rely on who wouldn’t report to Dante. Not that I had any intention to keep more from him. Maybe Aria’s appearance would already drive a wedge between us.

I closed my eyes, feeling exhausted and tired. My eyes shot open. “We need to pick up Anna from Bibi.”

Enzo shook his head. “Taft already did.”

I bit my lip, hoping Bibi wasn’t in trouble because of me.

Anna stormed my way when I entered the mansion, beaming. Bless her and her childish joy. “Mommy! Look at my painting!”

I stroked Anna’s head and took the piece of paper she held out to me. With my huge bump, I couldn’t lift her into my arms anymore, even if I wanted to do it.

It was a drawing of flowers and four stick figures.

“That’s us! And Leonas!”

“It’s beautiful.”

“Can we draw together?”

I glanced at the clock. It was already past Anna’s bedtime, but I was glad for the distraction. Nodding, I allowed Anna to lead me into the living room.

I kept checking my phone for messages from Dante but only Bibi asked how I was. The later it got, the more worried I was. What was Dante doing to Aria?

PART 2

Dante

I walked into the Santa Fe, spotting Val and Aria. My disappointment and anger toward Val were something I couldn't focus on now.

Aria spotted me as I walked toward them, shock reflecting on her face. She looked at Val who frantically shook her head.

"I didn't tell him anything, Aria. I would never—"

I stopped beside their booth. "She didn't," I said coldly. I'd discuss this with Val later. After her secrecy about Frank and Antonio at the beginning of our marriage, I'd hoped we'd reached a new level of trust, one that allowed Val to tell me everything, especially crucial information like the presence of Aria in my city. Maybe she didn't understand how serious this war was.

I met Val's worried gaze. "But in a time like this, I won't let you go anywhere without my knowledge."

"You tracked me," she said, staring down at her mobile lying flat on the table.

"That, yes, and Enzo recognized a familiar face this morning during your brunch with Bibiana but he wasn't sure, and when he sent me a photo of Aria and I told him to grab her, she had already disappeared."

I slid into Aria's booth, forcing her to make room for me with my body. She sucked in a sharp breath.

Val glanced between Aria and me anxiously. “Dante,” she began. She was going to try and placate me, but this was no longer her business. I’d deal with her later.

“Go outside. Two of my men are waiting for you. They will take you home.”

“Dante,” she tried again, pleading with me.

“Valentina,” I growled. I hadn’t taken that tone with her in a very long time, and certainly didn’t like taking it with her in her pregnant state but she’d betrayed me and that would have to be addressed later.

Cradling her belly, Valentina rose. She searched my eyes but I didn’t allow her to read me.

“Thank you, Val, for coming here,” Aria whispered.

Val walked past me and out of the restaurant.

I turned to Aria. Her fear shone brightly in her eyes. She’d never been good at hiding her emotions, especially to someone who was used to reading others. Even on her wedding day, her terror had been clear as day. Now her fear was directed at me. “I will call the waiter over now and pay for dinner. We will get up together, you will stay at my side, and we will go to my car and you will get in.”

Aria nodded. She was more complacent than Gianna, but I was still wary of her submittal. After I’d paid, I grabbed Aria’s coat and helped her into it. I touched her shoulders, my body close to hers. It was a too intimate gesture. One I usually would have avoided because it was disrespectful toward Aria but it was necessary. My eyes sought the outside

of the restaurant but I couldn’t see the photographer from my vantage point.

I leaned even closer, bringing my mouth close to her ear. “Don’t try to run or do anything stupid, Aria. I’d hate having to hurt you.”

Aria trembled in my hold and nodded again. I led her to my car, holding her hand tightly, and finally noticed the photographer hidden behind two buildings. The lens was directed toward us.

Aria got into the car and I slipped behind the steering wheel.

“I assume you are alone,” I said as I steered us away from the restaurant. I wasn’t in a hurry. The photographer needed to catch up with us.

“I am.”

It’s what I’d suspected. Aria wasn’t the type to risk her sisters’ lives like she did her own, and none of Luca’s men, much less Luca, would have supported her in this foolish endeavor.

“You shouldn’t have come to Chicago.” The photographer was three cars behind us. Aria was quiet beside me. I wasn’t surprised she didn’t ask about her father. There was only bad blood between them.

I pulled off the main road and parked near train tracks. For the following photos, this was the more likely place. If our affair were true, a more deserted place would be a good choice to engage in more entertaining activities.

Rocco’s advice was one I couldn’t follow. For one, I considered it cheating even if it was just for show, and second my stance on sexual violence against women hadn’t changed. I wouldn’t violate Aria even if it would lead to better photos and consequentially a stronger reaction from Luca. As jealous as he was, even less explicit photos would make him draw the wrong conclusions and cause the wanted damage.

Aria looked down to the bag in the legroom between her feet. The contemplative expression told me there was something inside she debated using against me. Before she could force me to hurt her in self-defense, I reached for the bag.

Aria flinched, her head colliding hard with the window. “No!”

I searched her face and the horror in her eyes told me all I needed to know. She thought I was coming on to her, would force myself on her in this deserted place to break her and Luca. And while that would certainly crush Luca like Rocco had predicted, which was why mass-rapes were such a common practice in wars of the past and even sometimes today, the mere idea disgusted me deeply. I grasped the bag like I’d intended to do and returned to my side.

Aria released a shuddering breath, not moving away from her position pressed against the window.

“Aria, you are Luca’s wife; a war won’t change that. And even if you weren’t his wife, you wouldn’t have to fear *that* from me, or from anyone else in Chicago. I swear it.”

“Thank you, Dante.” She finally sat up, but the tension remained in her body.

“There’s no need to thank me for respecting your body.”

“What will you do with me then?”

Aria was my unknowing pawn. She’d find out about this trap, about the photos later, probably from Luca. “That is the question, I suppose. I should use you to punish Luca and the Famiglia. Or at the very least use you as leverage to blackmail him.”

Fear flashed across Aria’s face. I didn’t think it was yet for her own fate. She loved Luca. I’d witnessed their feelings for each other in our encounters over the years. It seemed impossible considering my assessment of Luca’s personality but it was the indisputable truth.

“Luca is Capo. He won’t risk the Famiglia.”

Of course, she’d say that. “But you are his wife, and I saw the way he looks at you. There’s only one thing Luca would risk his position as Capo over, and that’s you.”

“I think you are overestimating my worth. Luca’s first choice will always be the Famiglia.”

Aria’s lying skills had improved but they weren’t convincing enough for me. “And I think you are underestimating your worth for good reason.”

“I’m not. Luca won’t risk his territory. You don’t know him as well as I do.”

“And that’s the problem. If Luca didn’t comply with our requests, I’d have to try to convince him.” Rocco had suggested this. Arturo wouldn’t have trouble causing a

woman pain. He didn’t have trouble causing anyone pain. My father would have chosen this option and many of my men would have been in favor of it as well. Maybe it was the best for the Outfit, but hurting Aria, an innocent woman, in any way was out of the question.

“By hurting me.”

“By hurting you. I’m not very fond of inflicting pain on women. Yet, the Outfit is where my concern lies.” Aria couldn’t read me, couldn’t know that I’d already made my choice. I’d never hurt her the way blackmailing Luca required. Not only because I’d known her as a young girl and felt obligated to her but because Val would never forgive me if I hurt Aria. She and I had often talked about how women in our world often suffered either through their husbands or for their husbands’ faults, and she hated it fiercely. If I became a man who tortured a woman, even if it was through Arturo’s hand, she’d resent me.

Val’s feelings toward my actions shouldn’t be of concern for me. She was only a woman, not of concern in the eyes of so many of my men, but I valued her opinion, and even more than that, I needed her support, her love.

“There’s still Matteo, and the rest of the Famiglia. Luca has to consider their wishes.”

“Luca knows how to make people see things how he wants them to see them. Luca is the strongest Capo New York has seen in a long time. His men look up to him, but they don’t know his weakness.”

Luca had almost everyone fooled about his invulnerability, about the fact that he didn't care for anyone. Aria was the exemption though.

"Luca will do anything to stay Capo. It's in his blood. Ultimately if he has to choose between me and power, he will choose power, believe me."

I didn't doubt Luca's absolute determination to stay in power. He was born to be Capo, just like me. It was in our blood. "Perhaps. But perhaps you are only trying to save yourself and Luca. Perhaps you realize that you being here could mean the end of the Famiglia."

"No matter what you do to me, Luca won't give up his territory. Luca won't bow down to anyone."

"But he won't stand back and have you tortured."

Aria flinched. I smiled coldly. "He won't. He will attack Chicago and kill every man. He will show strength, not weakness. Luca is the most ruthless man I know, Dante, and I've grown up knowing *you*. Don't mistake his possessiveness for anything else. I'm his possession, and he will tear down your city and your home to get it back."

"And I will do the same with New York. You grew up seeing my civilized mask, Aria. Don't mistake it for my true nature. Luca carries his monster on the outside; I keep mine buried until I need it."

Aria reached for the door, trying to escape.

"Aria," I warned. Did she really think she could escape? We were in an area where Aria would be in more danger outside the car than with me.

“I’m going to be sick,” she said, and one look at her face told me she said the truth.

I lifted the locks and Aria stormed out. I followed her and found her bent over behind the car, throwing up.

I held out a tissue. “Here.”

Aria was trembling as she straightened. “Thanks.” Tears stained her face and she looked close to losing consciousness. I hardly ever dealt with women, except for the few times we had to deal with Bratva whores.

Aria met my gaze. “Is this fear or something else?” I asked. I wanted to scare her, but this open terror was more than I’d anticipated.

“Both. I’ve never been more scared of you than I am today.” If she hoped for me to become soft, she would be disappointed. “But that’s not it. I am pregnant.”



A pregnancy test confirmed Aria’s claim. Her pregnancy gave me another advantage over Luca. I should have consulted with Rocco immediately, but given these new circumstances, I was fairly sure he’d have advised me to keep Aria, to blackmail Luca with the unborn child.

Thinking of Val and how worried I was for her because she was so vulnerable being pregnant, I knew without a doubt that Luca would go completely crazy. He’d lose his mind, and he would attack.

Keeping Aria as a captive would only put Val and Anna in danger, because if I targeted his wife and child like that, Luca would do the same with my family. And if Val found out I kept a pregnant woman as bait, she'd definitely not forgive me. I had few morals but not hurting a pregnant woman was definitely one of them. Aria wouldn't suffer in my territory.

Of course, as I watched Aria head toward the airport to fly back to New York, I knew I was leading her and Luca into a trap. The photos the photographer had taken would confirm Luca's distrustful nature. He'd eagerly eat up the lie because this fake truth made more sense in his twisted brain than the reality of Aria's love and faithfulness.

It was a devious plan, but one that could possibly destroy Luca and with him the Famiglia, or at least shake them up so badly that they were vulnerable. It also made me look bad, but would make Val look like another victim and thus didn't give Luca reason to target her or Anna.

Many of my men would be unhappy with this tactic, would say I should have kept Aria to control Luca. Some might even say I didn't make the necessary choice for the Outfit. We were at war. Mercy toward a woman, especially Aria Vitiello, would be seen as unnecessary, maybe even weakness. Yet, my conscience had forced me to choose an innocent woman over the Outfit.

I pulled away from the airport and called Rocco, giving him an update on the situation minus Aria's pregnancy. The photographer would forward the photos to us tonight and then we'd choose the most compromising and send them to

several of New York’s magazines and newspapers, hoping they’d make headline in their online presences tomorrow and in their actual prints the day after. It would cause a major scandal, one that would give the conservatives in Luca’s Famiglia ammunition against him. Rocco tried to convince me of a cooperation with a couple of Luca’s uncles who’d approached us before, but I mistrusted those old Vitiello men even more than Luca.

I didn’t need their help.

Now I needed to talk to Val. About trust. About betrayal.

PART 3

Dante

Val was still up when I returned home. My anger had built during the drive to the mansion but when I entered the bedroom and spotted my heavily pregnant wife perching on the edge of the bed, kneading her hands anxiously, it was difficult to hold on to my fury. She pushed slowly to her feet, her eyes swimming with worry. Her red silk nightgown stretched over her belly. “What did you do to Aria?”

For some reason, her worry over Aria kindled my anger anew. I undid my cuffs and headed toward the walk-in closet and not Val.

“You went to a meeting with the wife of the Famiglia Capo without telling me, without protection, Val,” I said. I shrugged off my jacket and tossed it over a chair as Val appeared in the doorway.

“Aria isn’t a danger to me. I’ve known her all my life. We are cousins.”

I shook my head, my fingers steady as I removed my tie and unbuttoned my shirt, despite the emotions shaking me up.

I narrowed my eyes at her. “We are at war.” It wasn’t just anger over her betrayal I felt. I was also worried. She risked too much. This could have been a trap.

Cradling her belly, Val leaned against the doorframe. “You are at war, Dante. The Outfit is. But Aria and I, we aren’t.”

I gritted my teeth at her refusal to accept the sad truth. This war was all-encompassing. “It could have been a trick. Luca could have set her up to it. You risked too much.”

Val raised her brows. “You really think Aria would have led me into a trap so Luca could capture me? And then what?”

“It’s a good thing that we’ll never find out.” Left in my briefs, I moved to walk out but Val stepped in the way.

“Where’s Aria?” Val asked again, touching my bare chest. “What did you do to her?”

Grabbing her shoulders, I gently pushed her out of my way and headed for the bathroom. Of course, Val followed me. “Dante, don’t ignore me now. Tell me what you did to Aria. I deserve to know.”

I slammed my palm down on the sink. “Didn’t I deserve to know that Aria Vitiello was in my territory? That she intended to meet my wife? What did she want here? Why did she want to meet you?”

Val paled at my open wrath. “She wanted to talk about Fabiano. She’s worried about him because of this war, because of Rocco.”

I shook my head. “Fabiano is part of the Outfit. He isn’t her concern.”

“If Leonas was part of another famiglia, would he no longer be your concern?”

“Leonas is born into the Outfit and he’ll rule over the Outfit. There won’t ever be anything else for him.”

Val looked down at her belly with a small frown. “But what if he doesn’t want to be.”

“Valentina, this discussion is moot. Leonas will be raised to be Capo. He’ll know nothing else. He’ll want nothing else. This discussion is over.”

Val turned around but her soft intake of breath told me she was going to cry. I clutched the edge of the sink, counting to three and trying to calm myself. I straightened and followed Val. She looked out of the window, her shoulders trembling. She was close to her due date and emotionally vulnerable.

I sighed. I didn’t want to fight with her, not in the state she was in. I walked closer and touched Val’s bare shoulders then pressed a gentle kiss to her neck. “Dante,” she whispered. Our eyes met in the reflection of the window and as usual, I had a hard time staying mad at her when she looked at me.

“I sent her back to New York.”

Val’s lips parted with surprise. “Really?” She turned in my hold, causing her belly to bump into my abs.

I brushed the tears away from her pale cheeks. “Really.”

Her brows puckered. “Why? Having her in your hands would have given you an advantage over Luca.”

Luca would have lost his mind. He would have orchestrated an attack on Chicago. It was an idea I’d entertained often, but my decision was made and I was still certain it had been the right one.

“Aria is pregnant.”

Val looked thoughtful for a moment then she wrapped her arms around me. “I thought I saw her touch her belly twice but I didn’t really think much of it. I’m so happy for them.” She fell silent, seeing my expression. I didn’t give a fuck if Luca became a father. It only meant Leonas would have future Vitiellos to deal with. They wouldn’t remain innocent children forever.

Val smiled then kissed me. “That was the right thing to do.”

Val thought I’d acted out of the goodness of my heart. She didn’t know what I’d sent Aria back to. I wouldn’t be

able to hide it from her forever.

“You should get some rest. I still have work to do,” I said, and led her over to the bed.

Val stretched out but held onto my hand. “What will Rocco say? And your Underbosses? Won’t it cause discord that you let Aria go? Or will you try to keep it from them?”

I kissed her knuckles. “Don’t worry. I’ll handle it.”

I could tell Val wanted to argue, but I stepped back and left the room.

When I turned on my iPad in the office, the photographer had already sent me an email. I followed the link to the Dropbox and perused his shots. He’d done a marvelous job taking photos from an angle that made my interactions with Aria look intimate and secretive. For someone like Luca, these would have the effect of a nuclear bomb. He was wired to draw the worst conclusions. He and I always expected the worst from others, so it was easy to take any act of betrayal for granted.

I chose a selection of photos then forwarded them to Rocco. He’d send them to his contacts in the press, and hopefully tomorrow all hell would break loose in the Famiglia.

My eyes burnt with tiredness, but I doubted sleep would find me tonight. Too much had happened today, even more would happen tomorrow.

Eventually, I stood and headed upstairs. I walked into Anna’s room, careful not to make a sound as I headed for her bed. She was curled up on her side, her thumb in her mouth.

She used to do it often when she was a toddler but eventually we got her to stop. Sometimes I still caught her sucking her thumb at night though. I brushed a few strands of hair from her face then gently pulled her finger out. She made a small sound but didn't wake. I always tried to say goodnight to her or even read her a bedtime story, but on days like this, I sometimes came home when she was already asleep. I leaned down at kissed her forehead then headed for the bedroom.

Val was asleep and she didn't wake when I slid into bed beside her. Tomorrow morning after breakfast I'd have to talk to her about the photos. I didn't want her to find out through others. The newspapers in Chicago wouldn't post any articles about Aria and me, Rocco and I would make sure of it, but these things usually spread like wildfire in the Outfit and soon people would be talking.

Closing my eyes, I rubbed my temple. This had the potential to spiral out of control. It was a very risky move. Some people in the Outfit would be enraged that I'd been in contact with Aria, not so much about an affair, others might applaud me for having a spy so close to Luca. I'd have to tell Giovanni about this tomorrow as well. He wouldn't be happy either. He'd worry how this would reflect on Val.

I slanted a look at my sleeping wife. I didn't want Val to get hurt emotionally. This move would at least guarantee her physical safety. She might not see it that way of course. I sat up and got out of bed. Sleep was out of the question. Picking

up my phone from the nightstand, I headed into the corridor and sent Rocco a text.

Hold off with the photos for now. We need to discuss the consequences.

His reply came swiftly.

Already sent. Sorry, Dante. It’s a good move in this war.

I sighed. He was right. This trickery was good for the Outfit. It might not be good for my marriage, however, and even though it shouldn’t be, my family was more important to me than my vow.

It was too late now. Things had been set in motion.

Valentina

The pressure on my bladder combined with sciatic pain woke me before sunrise once again. Dante didn’t stir when I snuck into the bathroom, which meant he’d gone to bed so late again that he’d probably only reached his deep sleep phase. After I’d washed my face, I crept out of the bedroom and downstairs to make myself a tea. Light from the office caught my attention. I headed that way and found Anna curled up on Dante’s desk chair, staring down at his iPad.

I smiled at how cute she looked with her disheveled hair and sleep-puffy eyes. “You know Daddy doesn’t want you to go into his office without his permission.”

Anna’s head shot up in surprise. She grinned sheepishly. “I was bored.”

I shook my head and went to her. “You can’t touch Daddy’s things. They are important for his work.” And potentially traumatic for a young child. Anna didn’t understand what Dante did.

“But he’s got photos of Aunt Aria.”

Frowning, I took the iPad from her and looked at the photo Anna was referring to. I quickly clicked through a myriad of other photos, all of them of Aria and Dante, some of them disturbingly intimate. I tried to keep my shock hidden because Anna watched me curiously.

“Why don’t you go to your bedroom and draw a bit. Mommy’s still very tired. But we’ll do a puzzle together later, okay?”

Anna pouted but eventually she nodded and dashed off. I had a feeling she’d head to our bedroom and see if Dante would entertain her, or at least allow her to watch TV, which he wouldn’t.

I sank down on the edge of the desk and even though I knew Dante would be angry, I read his email to Rocco and to the photographer.

I should have known that Dante hadn’t allowed Aria to leave out of the goodness of his heart. He was a cold-hearted killer, a brutal leader of a crime organization, and while he loved Anna and me, his feelings toward the majority of humankind were indifferent at best.

I clicked through the photos once more, lingering on the ones that showed Dante and Aria in a car. He leaned over her, his arm reaching between her legs. I knew Dante didn’t have an affair, especially not with Aria. She was gorgeous and a woman every man desired, but Dante was faithful.

How had these photos come to be? It was obviously a show, a show I didn’t think Aria was involved in. Dante was vehemently against sexual violence in any form against women. He wouldn’t have made Aria believe he’d abuse her. I couldn’t believe it.

The door opened and Dante stepped in, only dressed in pajama bottoms. My eyes trailed over his muscled body. He kept himself fit. He was the epitome of discipline, getting up early most days to get in a workout, to stay in shape and look strong because outward appearances were an important part of being a respected leader nowadays. Many women desired my husband for his power, for his looks, for his unattainability.

Many people would eat up the lie eagerly if word got out about the photos. Especially the traditionalists had always wondered why Dante had chosen *only* a widow. This would prove them right, and while I tried not to give anything about the opinions of others, this irked me. I stared at the photo once more. This had to be Rocco Scuderi’s idea. He was ruthless and loved to play dirty.

Dante came closer, glancing at the photos then at me. A flicker of concern showed on his face, giving me strange

satisfaction. “Val,” he said carefully. “I’ve had the photos taken…”

I glared. “So you could make Luca believe Aria had an affair with you.”

He considered me a moment before he nodded. I wasn’t clueless. Since Anna had been born, I rarely visited our underground casino anymore. I worked from home, doing event planning, calling high rollers and especially politicians, and most importantly dealing with complaints from the prostitutes working in the many brothels in Chicago. But I knew what was going on, knew how mob politics worked, especially when Scuderi had his fingers in the mix.

“Why?” I asked, even though I had a suspicion, one that was cruel and genius at once.

Dante stopped beside me. “Because Luca tends to lose control when Aria is concerned. He’ll act without thinking. It’ll make him vulnerable, an easy target.”

So calculating and emotionless. I searched his face but the concern in it was for me not Aria. “What about Aria? What if Luca hurts her? Kills her?”

I was starting to feel sick just thinking about it. Luca was brutal. Even if he loved Aria, he could still kill her. He wouldn’t be the first man to kill his wife in a jealous rage. Love, or what many people make of it, has been the reason for many depraved acts.

Dante touched my shoulder gently. “He won’t.”

“How can you be sure? Are you telling me Luca Vitiello, a man who crushed his cousin’s throat, is not capable of killing a woman in a jealous rage?”

Dante smiled strangely. “Luca could kill anyone for whatever reason he sees fit. He doesn’t even need a reason. But Aria is the one person in this world, he’ll never kill.”

I stared at my husband, wishing I shared his conviction, wishing I could understand why he could be this certain.

“How can you be sure?” I repeated angrily.

Dante stroked my cheek. “Because deep down Luca and I are the same, we share the same demons, the same cruel nature. A nature that allows us to do what must be done and prevents us from caring for others. Love doesn’t come easy to us but if we love, it consumes us.” Dante’s gaze seemed to caress my face. “I could never hurt you, never kill you, Val. My love for you will always stop me, and it’s the same for Luca where Aria is concerned.”

“I hope you are right.”

“I am.”

“But this might destroy their marriage, might unhinge Luca completely,” I said then nodded. “But that’s what you want, right? Take away Luca’s safe haven, make him lose control. This could toss the Famiglia into chaos.”

“Ultimately, Aria didn’t leave me a choice. I couldn’t let this opportunity pass. She walked into my territory, if I’d let her leave without using that to our advantage, I would have looked weak. Letting her go at all was a huge risk. I don’t owe Aria anything.”

I swallowed. “She’s Anna’s godmother.”

“They won’t ever see each other again, unless Luca surrenders or dies, then maybe there’ll be peace again.”

I touched my belly. Would Leonas grow up in a world of war? Would he rule over the Outfit still at war? It scared me.

Dante kissed my temple then caressed my belly. “How are you feeling?”

I almost laughed because I was miserable. Of course, he meant physically.

“Good. Leonas is very active today,” I said with a small smile despite the tension I felt. I took Dante’s hand and pressed it to the spot where Leonas was kicking.

Dante’s expression softened.

“You realize these photos will stir up a scandal in the Outfit too. I’ll be the poor pregnant wife who was cheated on, with the *most beautiful woman* the Outfit had to offer to Luca. That will give all the Golden Couple enthusiasts new ammunition. I bet a few will even hope Aria will run off to Chicago so she can marry you.”

Dante made a face as if he tasted something bitter. “The Golden Couple rumor has always been nonsense.” He cradled my face, his eyes almost angry. “And as far as I’m concerned, Valentina, you are the most beautiful woman in the Outfit.”

“Aria is no longer in the Outfit,” I reminded him, because he deserved to suffer for this move.

He let out a low breath. “For me you are the most beautiful woman.”

I didn’t let his words mollify me. “What if the rumors about your affair eventually reach Anna’s ears? She’s still too young to understand, but she’ll realize it’s something bad.”

“She won’t find out. These photos won’t be published anywhere in my territory, Val.”

“People will talk. It’ll spread.”

Dante nodded slowly. “Yes, no matter what I do, I won’t be able to silence everyone in the Outfit. You will have to bear some of the consequences of my actions, even if I never wanted you to. I’m sorry for that.”

I leaned back with wide eyes.

“What is it?”

“I think this is only the second time you said you’re sorry.”

He smiled darkly. “I had many more reasons to apologize to you, I know, but it’s something I’m not very good at.”

“I know. And I appreciate your apology, but I still wish you would have found another way to attack the Famiglia than by making up an affair rumor.”

Dante didn’t say anything but I could tell that maybe part of him agreed.

PART 4

Dante

“The photos haven’t appeared anywhere yet,” Rocco said as a way of greeting as he entered my office the next afternoon.

“Luca must have managed to keep them under taps. But he has seen them, I have no doubt.”

Rocco nodded thoughtfully as he sank down in the armchair across from me. “My contacts to the press beyond our borders are very limited. I’m hoping some rag will have the balls to post an article. It’s a scandal none of them should pass up on.”

“Indeed,” I said. I had to admit I wasn’t entirely unhappy with the fact that the photos hadn’t made headline. The possible rumors had worried Val more than I’d anticipated, maybe because of her pregnancy but I didn’t want to stress her out more than absolutely necessary. “I’m sure Luca will send me some kind of message soon.”

“I’d guess a bloody one. I doubt he’ll give you a call.”

I smiled grimly. Luca would definitely send a bloody warning of what was to come. He would retribute, no doubt.

“I could tell Fabiano to call Liliana or Gianna under the pretense of wanting to talk to them. That way we might be able to get intel on what’s going on in the Vitiello household. Luca must have confronted Aria by now.”

I nodded slowly. Gianna and Liliana might reveal something to their brother. He had started his initiation

process, so he needed to learn to do even the difficult task, like laying a trap to his sisters. I ran a hand through my hair. When I'd been a young man, I'd dreamed of being a better man, a better Capo. Unfortunately, I couldn't be both.

"Have you told Giovanni yet?"

I shook my head. "I'm meeting him later. He and Livia are coming over for dinner to see Anna and check on Val."

"Only two more weeks?" Rocco said.

I nodded. I'd been worried that Leonas would come early like Anna, but so far Val's second pregnancy had been free of complications.

Rocco shook his head, then a look of pride crossed his face. "I'm becoming a father too. It's still very early so we haven't announced it yet, but if things go well, my newborn son and your Leonas can become friends."

"Congrats," I said. Rocco hadn't been a good father to his children so far. I hoped he'd do a better job with this child.

I led Rocco toward the front door. Val lingered on the staircase and gave Rocco her official smile, but something in her face told me she was in pain. The moment Rocco was out of the door, I stalked toward her. "Val, what's wrong?"

She smiled. "Labor. I think Leonas doesn't want to wait anymore."

"Now?"

She laughed then winced. "Well, this is my first natural birth, at least I hope it'll be… so I don't know how long this'll

take but we probably have time to call my parents so they take Anna and grab my hospital bag."

"Is this because of me again?" Last time Val's pregnancy had been horrible because I'd made her life so difficult. Was her labor linked to our conversation yesterday?

She rolled her eyes. "Not everything is about you, Dante. This baby is big already. I'm glad he wants to get out a bit sooner. Now get my bag and Anna. I'll call my parents."

I nodded and hurried up the stairs.

Fifteen minutes later, we were in the car on our way to Val's parents to drop Anna off.

"Are you sure we can make this detour?" I asked again. Labor was something I couldn't control and it was driving me crazy.

Val gave me a look, clutching her belly. "I'm sure. I called my midwife and she said I still have a few hours."

I wondered how the woman knew. Sometimes these things sped up unexpectedly. Giovanni and Livia waited on the front steps when we pulled up. Anna began crying when Livia tried to pry her off Val's legs.

"It's okay, sweetheart," Livia crooned. "Your mommy will be fine."

Anna's fearful cries tore at me and usually I would have comforted her but I needed to get Val to hospital.

Only when we finally arrived in hospital did I become a bit calmer. Like Val had said, the labor took six more hours and it was late evening when Leonas released his first cry.

He was much bigger than Anna had been. A few weeks made such a difference. The midwife put him into Val’s arms at once and I wrapped my arm around her shoulders. He looked like the photos I’d seen of myself as a baby.

“He’s you,” Val said with a laugh.

“Maybe he’ll get your eyes.”

“We’ll see,” she whispered and stroked his back gently. It was strange to think that one of the happiest moments of my life followed so closely after an act of war. Maybe it was a reminder that I needed to focus on the good in my life, even if evil would always be my closest companion.



Father’s congrats came swiftly after he’d heard of Leonas’ birth. While he hadn’t showed the slightest interest in meeting Anna, he couldn’t wait to meet my son, the heir to our bloodline how he never stopped emphasizing. I didn’t mention it to Val, even though she was very aware of my parents’ views.

Val was allowed to leave the hospital the next day. I wanted her home as quickly as possible, considering the escalating conflict with the Famiglia.

“I can’t wait for Anna to meet her little brother. I hope her excitement won’t disappear once she realizes he isn’t really a toy,” Val said as we stepped into our mansion.

Giovanni and Livia would bring Anna over later and stay for lunch.

“I’m sure it’ll be fine. It’s good for her to share our attention.”

“I know,” Val said, smiling down at Leonas who was fast asleep in his carrier. I stroked her back. I hadn’t left her side since she’d given birth. My protectiveness was at an all-time high and it was difficult to suppress the feeling.

My phone vibrated in my pocket. I took it out and Rocco’s name flashed on the screen. I had a feeling this was an update on the photo situation. I wasn’t sure I wanted it right now, but business couldn’t wait.

“It’s okay. Take the call,” Val said. “I’ll go ahead into the kitchen and show Leonas to Gabby and Zita. They’re probably busy cooking lunch. I smell roast chicken.”

I kissed her, then pressed the phone against my ear. “What is it, Rocco?”

“Congrats on your son,” he said but I could tell from the sound of his voice that it wasn’t the reason for his call. Something had happened.

“What’s going on?” I asked in a low voice, heading into my office so Valentina wouldn’t overhear anything. She didn’t need to worry.

“The photographer disappeared.”

“What do you mean he disappeared?”

“I tried calling him but he didn’t pick up. Then I called in his agency and they said they can’t reach him. I sent

someone over to his apartment to check on him but he wasn't there. His car parked in its usual place."

"You think someone from the Famiglia kidnapped him?" It was the logical explanation, almost too logical for Luca after seeing photos of Aria with me.

"Yes. Or it could be the mole."

My mouth tightened. We'd suspected a spy in our ranks for a while but we didn't have any clues as to who it could be. "Considering that the photos haven't made headline yet, it could be Luca's intention to make sure it stays that way."

"We can leak the photos directly to several social media platforms. Once they are online, even Luca can't stop them from spreading."

"No, Luca is already out of control. He'll make mistakes. That's what we wanted. Look at what he did to those bikers. He's unpredictable. The photos hit him where they were supposed to." The bloodbath in Jersey had been discussed enthusiastically in several online forums in the darknet, with many speculations pointing toward Luca. I had no doubt it was him.

"All right. What are we supposed to do about the photographer?"

"He'll be dead by now, or wish he was. Our focus needs to be on finding the possible spy in our ranks."

"Luca's started weeding out the Famiglia from what I hear."

Of course, he had. He'd vent his anger on anyone who'd ever opposed him and kill as many of his opponents as

possible.

I'd begun removing soldiers who weren't loyal to me long before I'd become Capo. Luca had a lot of catching up to do. "Attack his borders and try to strike up a cooperation with the MCs in his territory."

"They don't cooperate well. They follow their own rules. We can never know if we can trust them."

"I have absolutely no intention to trust any of them. I want them to carry out attacks on Famiglia clubs and storage facilities. We'll provide them with drugs and guns in return."

"I'll try my luck. Right now, I don't have any close contacts but I'll try to build them."

The bell rang. "I need to hang up now. Keep me updated."

I stepped back out of my office just when Gabby opened the front door. Anna spotted me immediately and stormed toward me, the skirt of her plaid dress fluttering around her short legs. I picked her up and kissed her cheek. Livia had styled her hair with French braids again, Anna's favorite hairdo. "Where is he?" she asked excitedly.

I smiled, nodding toward the kitchen door where Val just walked out with Leonas on her arm. Anna's eyes widened. "He's white!"

I chuckled. "He's pale blond, but his hair will probably darken a bit over the years like mine did."

Anna peered up at me. "Your hair was white when you were a baby?"

“Like Leonas’ hair, yes.”

“And I have Mommy’s hair?”

Val smiled as she stopped beside us. “Almost.”

Giovanni and Livia joined us, smiling proudly.

“Did everything go well?” Val asked her parents then kissed Anna’s forehead.

“Everything went well,” Giovanni said, but his eyes darted to me and tightened. Since he’d found out about the staged photos, he’d kept his distance to me. I assumed because he worried otherwise he’d show his anger. Being my father-in-law as well as Underboss proved tricky.

Livia crooned over Leonas but he didn’t wake.

“Daddy?” Anna peered up at me. “Why’s he asleep?”

“He’s tired.”

“But I wanna meet him.”

I stroked her hair. “Soon, Anna.” She regarded him, her head tilted to the side as if he was a toy she didn’t understand. Val gave me a small smile, looking exhausted and happy. No matter how difficult things in the Outfit were, this sight always gave me hope for our future.

We all headed toward the dining area. I set Anna down so she could follow Val and ask her questions about Leonas.

“Can I have a quick word with you?” Giovanni asked when the women settled at the dining table.

“Of course,” I said and led him a few steps away. “I know you don’t approve of my plan.”

Giovanni shook his head. “There should have been another way to handle the situation, Dante. I don’t like how

this could reflect on Val."

"Nobody knows anything."

"Yet. To be honest, I'm glad Luca managed to keep the photos from making headlines."

I didn't say anything, not willing to admit that I was too. The plan was working its cause anyway and so I was determined to file it as a success, at least for outward appearances. "This plan affirmed my suspicion that we have a spy in our ranks. The photographer was kidnapped, and I doubt Luca could have sent someone from his Famiglia over so quickly. They would have to ask around for the address, and that would have attracted plenty of attention. The job must have been done by someone from our men who knew where to find him."

"The man has been on our payroll for years. Many people know about him. The list of possible spies would be very long."

"I know. We need to write every possible name down and go over them. If we can narrow it down to certain people who might have reason to be dissatisfied with their position in the Outfit, we'll take them aside and talk to them. If they act suspicious, we'll intensify our efforts."

Giovanni frowned. "I don't like the idea of a spy among our men. Do you really think it's the case?"

"I hope not, but I think we need to accept the possibility. Do you have any apparent suspects?"

Giovanni looked away with a distant expression. Something about his face made me believe there was

someone he had in mind but was still reluctant to name. “Giovanni?”

He quickly shook his head. “I’ll put down names for you today and email them to you. I think we should join our wives, they are waiting for us.”

He was right. Val and Livia were looking our way. The plates were already filled with food. I inclined my head, but my suspicion remained. If Giovanni hesitated to reveal a name, it must be someone he was close to, so either one of his closest soldiers or family. “Is Orazio still in Chicago? He’s been working with the Famiglia closely and might have clues about possible suspects.”

Giovanni’s expression darkened. “We got in an argument yesterday. I haven’t talked to him since then. He’s supposed to help me with our new drug lab until next week.”

I hadn’t seen Orazio in a couple of months. Since the war with the Famiglia had broken out again, he’d mostly worked for Pietro in Minneapolis and only occasionally when Giovanni insisted in Chicago as had been the case the last two weeks, but we hadn’t crossed paths. It had been a constant conflict between the two that he refused to finally return to Chicago and work with his father. After all, Orazio was supposed to take over as Underboss at some point. I knew Giovanni was dangling the position over his head under the condition that Orazio settled down and married a woman his parents chose for him. I hadn’t gotten involved so far, neither as Orazio’s brother-in-law nor as Capo. Forcing him into a bond he was reluctant about wasn’t part of my

duties. But eventually, Orazio would have to take over from Giovanni, so one of them would have to back down.

Val gave me a questioning look. I smoothed my expression. I didn't want to give her reason to worry. She should only focus on our newborn son, not the problems between her father and brother.

After lunch, I headed into the office and tried to call Orazio but the voicemail answered. Instead, I called Pietro, wondering if Orazio had returned to Minneapolis without telling his father. I'd have preferred to spend the day with Val and the kids, but as Capo, I couldn't let problems get out of control. Maybe I needed to have a word with Orazio. The conflict between Giovanni and him affected their work and Val, both of which were unacceptable.

"Dante, good to hear from you," Pietro said. "Are Leonas and Val home?"

It was easy to understand why Ines was so happy with him. He was one of the most easy-going Made Men I knew, but it didn't make him any less effective. He'd mastered the art of channeling his dark side. One of the reasons why I admired him.

"Yes, just this morning. I prefer to have them in the mansion right now."

"Understandable. I've been thinking about additional protection for Ines and the kids. Ines isn't too happy about the prospect of more guards in and around the house though."

“I doubt Luca will target them, yet caution is certainly advisable.”

“I assume you didn’t call to tell me about Leonas and Val. Are there any new developments with the photos?”

“Giovanni, Rocco and I are going to make a list with possible spies.”

Pietro was quiet for a moment. “And you want names from me? Or am I one of the suspects?”

It was said in jest but I wondered if Pietro worried about my trust in him. I’d never explicitly told him how much I appreciated his loyalty. He was one of the very last men I’d ever suspect, not only because the consequences would be devastating, if it were the case. It was a choice I’d never want to face. “I trust you, Pietro. Ines trusts you.” It was all I’d say.

Pietro cleared his throat. “Then you want names? You think one of my men might be among the traitors?”

“I hope it’s only one rat. And I don’t have any of your men in particular in mind. Orazio has been in contact with many soldiers who worked closely with the Famiglia over the years. I’d like a word with him.”

“I’m sure he can give you a list of people who got along too well with Famiglia soldiers. But…” He hesitated. “…why are you calling me? Orazio has been in Chicago for two weeks and so far he hasn’t returned to Minneapolis. Giovanni told me he’d have to help with the lab for another week. Don’t you think Orazio is going to visit Leonas and Val?”

“Giovanni had a fight with him, so I assumed he returned without a word.”

“Oh, well, he hasn’t called me yet. I’ll let you know if he shows up here. Maybe he just needed some time to calm down. Doesn’t he know Leonas was born?”

My suspicious nature reared its head, but I pushed it down. “Val sent him a text message. He congratulated her but hasn’t called or showed up. Maybe he wants to avoid Giovanni and plans a surprise visit later today or tomorrow.”

“Maybe,” Pietro said. “Giovanni gave him a hard time because of that girl of his. But he broke it off so many years ago I thought he’d have made peace with him by now.”

“They tolerate each other at best,” I said. I hadn’t gotten involved in their family matters. Giovanni had wanted to keep the thing hush-hush, I hadn’t told anyone but Pietro because I valued his input. Valentina and I hadn’t even been married yet when things between Orazio and the girl happened, and I’d been in mourning then.

Pietro sighed. “You don’t think…?”

He didn’t voice what I didn’t want to consider. “He’s a good soldier and family. Orazio would never betray the Outfit.” It was a fact I had to trust in because the alternative was absolutely unacceptable.

“He is.”

But he’d also worked very closely with the Famiglia during his time in Cleveland, and he’d talked a long time with Matteo at Val’s and my wedding. I shoved the thought aside.

“He’s family, and family sometimes fights. He’ll come around. Giovanni can be difficult.”

I stared at the photo frame on my desk with a photo of Val, Anna, and me during a day at the Great Lakes last summer. Val had the same photo on her desk in her office upstairs as well as a photo of our wider family, including Orazio. She’d tried to intensify their contact and they had talked on the phone at least once a month. Since Anna’s birth, Orazio had even visited every other month. Val loved her brother even if they weren’t as close as she wanted.

If Orazio was the traitor…

My chest tightened considering what I’d have to do. I wouldn’t hesitate to kill him. I would question him personally. It would be cowardly not to do so, and even if I didn’t do it with my own hands, Val would be devastated all the same. Could she live with it? Could she forgive me if I killed her brother? And what about Livia?

“I’m sure he’ll surprise you in the afternoon.”

“Let’s hope so.” My voice was steel but my insides were an all-consuming inferno.

Valentina

After breakfast the next day, Leonas was asleep beside me on the couch while I read a picture book with Anna who was curled up against my side. She’d hardly left my side since

Mamma and Papa had brought her home yesterday. I could tell that she was worried I wouldn't have time for her anymore now that Leonas was born. Stroking her hair, I flipped the page and continued reading.

My phone rang, startling me but luckily not Leonas. I picked up when I saw it was Orazio.

"Hi little brother," I said with a smile. In recent years, our relationship had improved again and it made me deliriously happy.

"Hey Val. How are you? Sorry I didn't call sooner."

"Don't worry. I guess Dad's keeping you busy so you don't get in trouble."

He made a non-committal noise, which could only mean that they'd had another fight. "I'm not on speaking terms with him at the moment."

"Again? But I thought you're helping him with the new drug lab?"

Another grunt. "Let's not talk about that now. I wanted to come over in the afternoon to see my nephew, is that okay?"

"Of course. Will you stay for dinner?"

"No… no, I can't."

I didn't ask why. Orazio always made himself scarce. He was a ladies' man, or so rumor had it and I assumed he'd rather spent the night with a conquest than with his sister and her two small kids, or his boss. He and Dante had never really become family. It was difficult for Orazio to ignore the fact that Dante was his Capo.

“I need to hang up now. See you later.”

“Until then,” I said. It sounded as if Orazio was in a car.

“Who was that?” Anna asked curiously.

“Uncle Orazio. He’s coming to visit this afternoon.”

“Yay!”

I grinned at her obvious delight then grabbed Leonas and stood. “Come. Let’s find Zita to tell her she needs to bake Orazio’s favorite cake.”

After talking to Zita and Gabby, I headed into Dante’s office to tell him about Orazio’s visit. He preferred to know who set foot into our mansion. His protectiveness hadn’t really lessened since he had two small kids to worry about. I knocked then stepped in. Anna immediately rushed toward her dad and he hoisted her up on his lap.

Dante’s brows furrowed in concern. The Famiglia situation had weighed heavily on him these last few days. “Is this a reminder that I’m working too much?”

“Yes!” Anna bellowed, beaming up at Dante. He wrapped an arm around her with a chuckle. “All right.”

“Orazio called. He’s coming over for coffee.”

Dante’s demeanor shifted at once, becoming vigilant and focused. “He did? Where is he now?”

I pursed my lip. “I suppose in Chicago? Isn’t he helping my father?” Dante’s question threw me off, and at the same time worried me.

“Neither your father nor I could reach him since yesterday.”

“He said he had a fight with Papa. Maybe he needed time to cool off.”

“That’s what Pietro said.”

“You asked Pietro if Orazio had returned to Minneapolis.”

Dante looked down at Anna who’d begun drawing on one of the papers on his desk. But I had a feeling he was also doing it on purpose to avoid my eyes. “I prefer to know about the whereabouts of my men.”

Then it dawned on me and indignation rose in me. “You can’t seriously consider Orazio doing anything against the Outfit. He’s my brother, Dante. For God’s sake, please don’t drag our family even more into this war than we already are.”

Dante looked up with a pained expression. “I never meant to drag you into this. But it’s inevitable.”

Anna glanced between us. We tried not to argue in front of her and I already regretted my outburst but since the war had begun Dante suspected enemies at every corner. If his paranoia now extended to family that was simply too much.

Dante stood and set Anna down on his desk chair. “Can you draw a picture of us?”

Anna nodded and bent over the sheet with a look of acute concentration on her gorgeous face. Leonas shifted in my hold and I rocked him gently so he wouldn’t start crying.

Dante righted his vest before he headed my way, touching my shoulder. “I don’t suspect Orazio, Val. But his conflict with your father is something that concerns me

greatly. He needs to make peace with him and step up to his duties."

I didn't catch a hint of deceit on Dante's face but still a small part of me stayed worried. "I know," I said quietly. "Dad expects a lot from Orazio but my brother wants to have a little freedom. Maybe that's why he's not willing to settle down with one of the possible brides Dad keeps pushing on him."

"At some point, he needs to marry."

"Not everyone wants to settle for less than love," I said, even if I wasn't sure if a wish for love held Orazio back or if he just wanted to keep having fun.

"We didn't settle," Dante said firmly, pulling me closer but careful not to squish our sleeping son. "We worked for our love, and we were rewarded."

I cocked an eyebrow with a teasing smile. "We?"

Dante sighed and kissed my mouth. "You did all the work in the beginning, I know. If it wasn't for your stubborn streak, I'd still be—"

"…sulking in your office?"

A hint of exasperation flickered in his eyes. "…caught up in the past."

"Done!" Anna exclaimed.

"I'll talk to Orazio," I promised.

"I'll have a word with him today as well."

"Don't go all Capo on him."

"I am his Capo, Val. I doubt he'll ever see me as anything else."

I nodded. “All right. Bibi is supposed to come over any moment for lunch. Will you join us or are you going to work?”

“I need to work. I’m sure you two have a lot to talk about.”

Anna hopped off the chair and rushed over to us, brandishing her drawing excitedly. “Look!”

Dante squatted beside her and regarded her artwork patiently as she explained every stick figure to him. I stifled laughter at his serious expression. I loved seeing him with Anna, how he tried to make her feel validated with everything she did.



Fifteen minutes later Bibi arrived at our mansion for a playdate. Luisa and Anna loved each other, a fact that made me deliriously happy. I was glad that Anna had one of her best friends living close by because she was always sad that she couldn’t see Sofia very often due to the distance between them.

I nodded toward the guards sitting in the car in front of our house who’d driven Bibi over. She didn’t have a license unlike me but even I hardly ever drove anymore now that I had kids. Dante didn’t want me to go anywhere without either Taft or Enzo, or preferably both anyway.

Bibi looked splendid in a formfitting wool dress with her auburn hair down as she strode toward me, holding Luisa by the hand who was dressed in a cute pink dress. Luisa looked exactly like Bibi as a child, a fact for which I was very grateful because Bibi didn't need any more reminders of her dead brute of a husband. Holding Leonas, I hugged her with one arm then cocked my brows. "You look stunning. Who are you trying to impress? Now I feel underdressed."

I had opted for comfortable chino pants and a blouse that allowed quick access to my breasts for nursing.

She flushed, looking around in embarrassment as if someone might overhear us, and I ushered her in. Anna and Luisa hugged then they rushed upstairs, probably to play in Anna's room.

Bibi crooned at Leonas, pointedly avoiding my eyes.

"Bibi, spill."

"You just gave birth, Val. You should be the center of attention, not me. I can't tell you about my dates."

I shoved her lightly. "Bibiana, you've spent years living in misery and had to listen to everyone's happy stories. Now it's your turn. Please, I need the distraction." I really didn't want to worry about Orazio and my father anymore. Then I realized what she'd said. "Dates, as in more than one? I thought you needed me as a chaperone."

Bibi looked mortified. "I know… but you had Leonas…"

"And you couldn't wait to meet Dario as soon as possible."

“We’ve been only been on two dates,” she admitted with an embarrassed laugh as we walked into the living room.

“And?”

“He’s very charming.” Her cheeks turned even redder and she focused on Leonas once more. It was adorable how embarrassed Bibi was about her dating life. She’d never had a crush or been in love, so this made me deliriously happy for her. “Can I hold him? He’s absolutely adorable!”

I nodded. She took Leonas from me and rocked him gently, looking absolutely smitten. Maybe Bibi was getting baby fever again. We sank down beside each other on the couch. Gabby had already prepared a pot of tea and an assortment of Bibi’s favorite macarons. It felt like I’d been eating constantly since I’d returned home.

“Bibi, you’re holding out on me.”

She bit her lip then met my gaze. “I let him kiss me after our second date. I didn’t want to—”

“He forced—”

“God no,” Bibi said quickly. “I mean I promised myself not to allow closeness because I didn’t want to give him the wrong impression but then I just… I don’t know. He stood so close and smelled so good and it just happened.”

“So you kissed,” I said with a grin. “So what? You’re a grown woman. And you deserve to enjoy yourself a bit.”

Bibi shook her head. “You know what people are going to say if they find out I kissed a man I’m not married to.”

“Nobody’s going to find out and if they do, they better keep their opinion to themselves. Nobody deserves this

more than you. So how was it?”

Bibi smiled. “It was just… wow. I’ve never felt anything like it, as if every part of me is melting. I had so much trouble pulling away.”

I linked our fingers, not able to stop grinning despite my worry over Orazio and the war. “Then don’t pull away next time. Who cares?”

Bibi shook her head, looking determined. “No. I can’t be selfish about this. I want Luisa to have the best future possible and I don’t want people to talk behind her back about how her mother had an affair.”

I squeezed her hand. “Dario is a lawyer. I’m sure he’s got his ways to be sneaky about it.”

Bibi giggled but then she became serious. “I want to do this on my terms. I told him I’d like to see him again but that we need to go slow.”

“Do whatever feels right. I’ll support you no matter what.”

I leaned forward and kissed Bibi’s cheeks. “But Bibi, you deserve some man-made orgasms.”

Bibi gasped then burst out laughing and I fell in, feeling lighter than I had in a while.

Valentina was usually the peacemaker in our family. She didn’t like the lingering conflict between her brother and father, but this time it was my decision to invite Giovanni over for a clarifying conversation. With the war getting worse, I couldn’t allow fights among my own men, much less my family.

“I hope they don’t argue in front of the kids,” Val said with a sigh.

Orazio was the first to arrive in the late afternoon. He looked as if he hadn’t slept much these last few days and I wondered if the problems with Giovanni caused him so much stress or if something else was behind his obvious exhaustion.

He shook my hand briefly and gave me a tight smile. I valued his work but we’d never really hit it off. He was as closed off as me, which didn’t really help to form a closer bond. “Congrats on becoming a father again.”

“Thank you.”

His expression became more relaxed when he walked up to Val and Leonas. He hugged her briefly.

“I’m so glad you could make it,” Val said, looking happy. Standing beside each other, it was unmistakable that Val and Orazio were siblings. They shared the same eyes and almost the same hair color.

“Anna!” I called. “Your uncle is here.”

Steps thundered upstairs then Anna flew down the steps almost stumbling and jumped into Orazio’s arms. He lifted her up with a smile. “Careful. You’re going to hurt yourself.”

I allowed him a few moments before I motioned toward my office.

Val's expression pinched. "We want to have coffee and cake."

"This'll only take a few minutes."

She didn't say anything but I knew she'd give me a piece of her mind later. I appreciated that Val had her own head, but I was also glad that she knew when to keep up appearances.

Orazio set down Anna and followed me into my office. "What is it?"

"Where have you been these last two days?"

Orazio's eyebrows rose slowly. He chuckled and shook his head. "First my father, now you? Why does everyone always interrogate me? I didn't know I had to announce wherever I went."

"Unlike your father, I'm your Capo."

"So this isn't just a friendly family visit, all right," he said bitterly.

I gritted my teeth. "Just answer my question, Orazio."

He met my gaze. He wasn't overly nervous, at least not more than the situation warranted. He was angry, that was obvious. "I had a huge fight with my father two days ago then again yesterday morning. You know he can't let it drop. Every time he sees me, he criticizes every single of my choices, especially my refusal to marry a woman he suggests. I'm fucking sick of it. I knew I was about to lose my shit on him and I didn't want that to happen so I decided to

clear my head. I went to a few bars, drank a few too many drinks, fucked a few girls… and now I'm here, Dante."

"What bars?"

He laughed darkly. "The Voda and the Kamchatka. My father made it very clear a long time ago that he doesn't want fellow Made Men to see my escapades, and nobody knows who I am in Bratva owned bars."

I narrowed my eyes but I couldn't detect a lie. "It's risky for you to walk into these bars. Even if our war with the Bratva in Chicago lies currently dormant, that could change at any time."

"From my looks, I could be Russian. Nobody questioned me."

I nodded. "The main reason why I was trying to call you is that Rocco and I suspect a spy to be behind a few unfortunate incidents and since you've been working closely with the Famiglia, you might know who got too close to them or maybe one of their women and switched loyalties."

Orazio shrugged. "Nobody comes to mind. The guys I worked with are loyal to you, Dante. I can't imagine them to betray the cause. Maybe there isn't a spy. Rocco can be a tad paranoid if you ask me."

I had to agree but even without Rocco's insistence I had suspected we had a mole. "Trust me, it's not an idea I entertain lightly, but it's a valid option and we need to be vigilant and find whoever is behind this."

"I'll keep my eyes open," Orazio said. "Just tell me one thing, did Val invite our father over so we can make peace?"

“I did. But first, let’s have coffee and cake. I’m sure Val is impatient for our return.”

Val gave me a questioning look when Orazio and I walked into the dining room. I gave her a smile but I could tell that she was still worried.

Luckily Anna was eager for attention from her uncle and kept the conversation up with her chatter. Leonas slept in his crib in a corner of the room, entirely unimpressed by our conversation. He seemed an easy-going baby. I hoped this would continue into his teenage years but most boys had a phase of rebellion, so I was prepared for it. It either ended when the boy reached manhood or extended into their adulthood and turned to resentment or even hatred as it was between Orazio and his father, or me and my own. I wanted things between my son and me to be different, but Leonas too would feel the burden of being a Cavallaro and heir to the Outfit early.

The bell rang and Orazio let out a sigh. “Peace is over now.”

“Don’t be so negative. Please try to make peace with Papa. For me and Mama at least.”

Orazio nodded but his expression made it clear that he doubted it would work out. Giovanni and Livia entered the room, followed by Gabby.

“Do you need anything else?” Gabby asked. Since Val had taken it upon herself to school her, Gabby had become less shy around other people, especially men.

“We have everything we need, thank you,” Val said as she rose from her chair to greet her parents. Orazio and I stood as well. Anna had already dashed toward her grandparents and hugged one after the other. Her relationship toward my own parents wasn’t as close but they weren’t the affectionate types, and Anna was a child that needed plenty of affection.

Livia headed over to her son and hugged him tightly then kissed his cheek. “Why do you have to worry us so much?”

“Mother,” he said quietly but firmly, and pried her hands off his face. “Maybe you should ask father why.”

Giovanni’s face flashed with anger but after a glance at Anna who watched with wide, curious eyes, he only smiled stiffly.

“How about we have coffee first and afterward you two discuss whatever it is you need to iron out?” Val suggested.

“Very well,” Giovanni said.

The atmosphere at the table was frosty. It reminded me of dinner at my own home in the past. Luckily Val made sure that our family dinners were a pleasant, warm gathering. Anna and Leonas would never know any different, except for the few times they had to have dinner at my parents’ house.

Afterward, I led Orazio and Giovanni into my office for a drink and a conversation. I didn’t want Anna to see her uncle and grandfather fighting with each other, and judging from the angry look the two had exchanged I had no doubt there would be loud arguments.

I closed the door. “Keep your voices down. I don’t want the rest of the house to listen in.”

“I can control my impulses,” Giovanni said pointedly.

“Is that so? Did you control your impulses when you called Lucy a slit-eyed whore?”

“That was one time—”

“Twice.”

“And that’s been years ago. Don’t tell me you’re still hung up on that goddamn girl. For god’s sake, there are million fish in the ocean. What’s wrong with our girls? There are so many beautiful Italian girls who’re eager to marry you and you refuse them all.”

“Because I don’t want them. Stop pestering me with possible brides!”

“You must marry. You’re twenty-five. If you want to become Underboss, you need to be married. End of story. I won’t step down before then.”

“What’s my marital status got to do with anything? Do you think I’ll be a better Underboss because I’m married? Why should my men respect me only because of a marriage?”

I cleared my throat. Their voices had risen and could definitely be heard well beyond this room. “You don’t have to marry now, Orazio, but your father is right. At some point, you need to choose a viable bride at least. Our traditions are as they are and they won’t change any time soon.”

“And that’s good,” Giovanni butted in.

Orazio shook his head. “So if I’m not marrying one of the girls you want, I’m not becoming Underboss?”

“Surely you want to marry someone?” I asked, trying to remain calm even if their fury kindled my own.

“Of course, I want to marry. Just not any of the girls my father suggests.”

“As long as I take breath, you won’t marry an Outsider!”

I stepped between them because things were about to escalate in a way I couldn’t allow. “This is enough. You’ll have to figure out a way to get along. We’re at war. We need to stand together to fight the Famiglia. Petty family disputes are the last thing we need.”

Orazio met my gaze. “Allow me to return to Minneapolis and work for Pietro. I can’t promise anything if I have to stay in Chicago.”

“I don’t expect your promise, I expect obedience,” I said sharply, looking at both of them. “But for now, you can return to Minneapolis.”

Giovanni opened his mouth but I raised my hand. “This is a temporary solution. I want you two to work it out. You, Orazio, will have to decide on a wife by next year. And you, Giovanni, will consult with Orazio on possible matches. Figure this out, and don’t drag Val into this.” The last was said in a more threatening tone than I’d intended but Val suffered because of the escalating conflict between her father and brother, and she needed all her strength to take care of our children.

Orazio’s mouth tightened but he gave a terse nod. Giovanni sighed. “That sounds reasonable.”

“Can I leave now? I’d like to return to Minneapolis as soon as possible.”

“If that’s what you want,” I said.

“It is. I’ll say goodbye to the women and then I’m gone.” He turned and left my office.

Giovanni shook his head. “Am I too strict? I don’t know what he expects! He knows the rules.”

“Is he still with that girl?”

“No, he broke it off a long time ago. At least, that’s what he told me. I made my point very clear back then so I doubt he would have lied.”

“Maybe things will calm down once he’s married and he realizes it’s not the end of the world.”

“I hope Leonas won’t ever give you the same troubles.”

I hoped so too.

PART 5

Eight months later

Valentina

Bibi was a gorgeous bride. She was practically glowing. At her first wedding, she'd cried horrified tears in the bathroom after the ceremony. Today, she smiled and even though I could tell that she was nervous and a bit overwhelmed by the attention, she exuded happiness. Dario towered over her, dressed in a dark suit, his dark hair short and beard accurately trimmed. His expression was steel, a mask he'd probably developed as a lawyer for the mob.

Sofia, Anna, and Luisa were flower girls and looked adorable in their matching pink dresses. It wasn't a big feast, only about one hundred guests and a celebration in the garden of Bibi's mansion. To many people's surprise, Dario had agreed to move into the house. His own penthouse wasn't a good place for a family and his older brother had inherited the family mansion.

I tried to entertain Leonas, rocking him and singing his favorite song as I watched Bibi and Dario accept the congratulations of the crowd. Even Bibi's parents seemed mollified by her second marriage. Not that those two had any business to shove their noses into Bibi's life ever again.

Leonas squirmed in my hold, unhappy with being carried. It was early August and he was already quite mobile at eight months, pulling himself up all the time. He wanted to explore the garden on his own but with so many people around I couldn't let him crawl over the lawn.

My eyes found Maria who was trying to calm down her crying two-months-old baby boy. Rocco was talking to Dante

and my father near the bar, obviously unconcerned about his young wife's distress. The girl was twenty and had not only been forced into a marriage with Rocco but also gotten pregnant almost immediately. It was obvious that she was overwhelmed. In the few times, I'd seen her since she'd given birth, she'd always looked close to tears.

I headed over to her with the still squirming Leonas and gave her an encouraging smile when I arrived at her side. "Hey Maria, are you all right?"

She nodded quickly. "Hello Mrs. Ca—"

"Please call me Val. No need for formalities. I'm not *that* much older than you."

Rocco Jr. had quieted down in his mother's arm, obviously fascinated by Leonas' antics. An idea crossed my mind. "Why don't you come over now and then so our boys can play together? Once they grow older the six months between them won't be as obvious."

Her face lit up. "Of course, if Rocco allows it."

Already now I found it incredibly weird that both her husband and her son were called Rocco. This had been a common practice in the mob in the past but it just showed how obnoxious Rocco Scuderi was, and he really didn't have the slightest reason to be.

"I can't imagine him having anything against you meeting with the Capo's wife and son," I said with a smile. Fabiano headed our way. He had grown and was as tall as me. His boyish features had become harsher, vigilant and as I'd noticed before he walked as if his ribs hurt him. I'd have

to have another talk to Dante about this. Making the boy strong for his future tasks was one thing, but abusing him was another.

“Do you want me to take him a bit?” he asked Maria.

She bit her lip. “You know your dad doesn’t like that.”

Fabiano’s mouth tightened but he nodded.

“How about you hold Leonas, Fabiano? Then I can cuddle with Rocco for a bit.”

Fabiano nodded and took Leonas from me. It was obvious that he’d held his little brother often in the last two months because he made sure to support my son the right way, even though Leonas was already way more mobile than Rocco.

“Can I?” I asked Maria who nodded, a look of gratefulness passing her face. I cradled her son in my arms and his eyes zeroed in on me. “Is it okay if I freshen up and grab a drink while you take care of him?”

“Of course,” I said.

Maria left quickly, not looking back. I felt pity for her.

“How are things with your initiation?”

Fabiano looked up, startled. “Good, I suppose?” Caution filled his eyes. “Am I allowed to talk to you about it?”

I let out a small laugh at his confusion. He was such a teenager. “Well, I’m the Capo’s wife.”

“Yeah…” He shrugged. “My father expects a lot from me before he wants to allow me to become a Made Man and take the tattoo.”

It was so typical of the Outfit to keep up the tattoo rumors among initiates and people who weren't Made Men when Fiore had stopped the tradition a long time ago. The Capo in the Outfit had never taken a tattoo, only his soldiers, but even that had been small in comparison to the ones from the Famiglia and Camorra, only a tiny chrysanthemum at their neck hidden by their hairline. It was supposed to show that the man had already been marked by death and didn't fear it because chrysanthemum were funeral flowers in our tradition. Fiore then decided that it was better not to show their association with the mob in any way, which was also why insisted in calling himself Boss, not Capo. Many people still called Dante the Boss even though he'd switched back to Capo.

"Maybe it's a good thing that you'll be older. It's a tough life."

Fabiano grimaced and looked back down at Leonas who was trying to squirm out of his hold. "He isn't happy on my arm."

"He isn't happy on anyone's arm right now. He wants to crawl."

Rocco Jr. on the other hand had fallen asleep in my arms. He had the dark eyes and hair of the Scuderi family, not Fabiano's lighter looks inherited from his mother's side of the family.

Rocco and Dante headed our way. Fabiano became tense at once but I only smiled.

“What’s going on?” Rocco asked pleasantly. That tone was one he used because Dante and I were around. I had a feeling his words would have been harsher if he’d been alone with Fabiano because the look he gave the boy was chilling.

“I asked Maria if I could hold your son for a little while, because he’s such a cute baby, and Fabiano had to help me with Leonas in the meantime, which he generously agreed to do. Right, Fabiano?”

Fabiano nodded. “Yes.”

Rocco frowned. “Where’s Maria?”

“She went to the restrooms. Oh, I asked her if we could meet once a week so our sons could grow up together. I hope you agree.”

The stern look was replaced by pride. “Of course.”

“I can take him now,” Dante said to Fabiano and took Leonas from him. Leonas briefly stopped his fussing but then he tried to get to the floor again. “He’s got his own head,” Dante said with a chuckle.

“You can give me my son now too, Valentina. I’m sure you’d like to grab a drink,” Rocco said politely, stretching out his hands. I had to stifle a snort. When I handed Rocco Jr. to him it became apparent that he didn’t hold him very often and only tried to imitate Dante. I didn’t comment.

Rocco knew what face to show to Dante and me, but I also knew how he was behind the closed door. When I’d still been in contact with Aria, she had admitted it to me.

I didn’t trust him one bit.



Eight months later

Leonas stormed out of his room before I could grab him, completely naked. I rushed after him, laughing. “Freeze!”

He didn’t of course. It was his newest hobby to tear down his clothes and diaper, and run through the house until someone caught him.

My heart almost skipped a beat when he stumbled down the staircase. He was already very steady on his legs at seventeen months but steps were another matter.

Anna poked her head out of her room with wide eyes, a crayon in her hand as usual.

Leonas laughed even louder as he half fell down the stairs. Luckily Dante stood at the base of the staircase, probably alerted by the noise and snatched Leonas up before he could make a faceplant.

I caught my breath halfway down the staircase. “He’s quick.”

Dante scanned Leonas with an exasperated smile. “You have to listen to your mom and you need to keep your clothes on.”

Leonas giggled as if that was the funniest thing he’d ever heard.

Dante in his posh three-piece suite holding a butt naked Leonas was an adorable sight.

I was sweaty from trying to wrangle our son into clothes three times in a row.

Dante took one look at me then said. “How about I get him dressed?”

He walked up the stairs until he reached me then kissed my mouth, lingering a bit longer, the look in his eyes telling me he wished we had some alone time. I wasn’t sure what he found sexy about my sweaty look but didn’t care.

“Good luck,” I said. Leonas obeyed his father better than me but at the moment, he was testing his limits. “I’ll check on Anna. Her piano teacher comes over in thirty minutes and I have a feeling she hasn’t practiced her song yet.”

“Drawing again?” Dante asked as we walked up the stairs beside me. I was glad he worked from home often so he could be there for our children. Many fathers were mostly absent from their offspring’s life but that wasn’t something I wanted. Anna and Leonas both loved spending time with him.

“She’s talented. Maybe we should consider getting her an art teacher as well.”

Dante nodded. “That might be a good idea.” I gave Leonas a small wave before I headed into Anna’s room. As expected she sat at her desk, hunched over a piece of paper, drawing a flower field. She was only four but already focused and driven when it came to art.

She briefly looked up when I came in and squatted beside her. “This is beautiful, love. But did you practice your song for piano lessons?”

She smiled sheepishly as she peered up at me through her thick dark lashes. “Once.”

Her little keyboard lay discarded on her bed.

“Is that a fib?”

Her smile got even more sheepish.

I stood and held out my hand. “Come on. Let’s go downstairs and practice at the piano. I’ll help you.”

Anna set down her crayon, took my hand and followed me outside. Dante wanted our kids to learn a musical instrument, like he and his sisters had done. He considered it a lesson in perseverance and patience. I’d learned to play the piano when I was a girl too, but hadn’t played in years until Anna had started taking lessons a little over a year ago.

The beautiful Steinway piano stood in the center of the library and seeing it always made my heart sing. Anna and I sat beside each other. I wasn’t a very good musician and like Anna, piano lessons had always meant duty not joy. Still I tried to make our piano time a fun adventure for my girl, so she’d maybe discover her love for the beautiful instrument soon. We played a few fun melodies before we started to practice the song her piano teacher had given her as homework.

“Mommy, will daddy be sad if I don’t play the piano?” Anna asked softly.

I paused. “No. But he loves listening to you play. And it’s like learning to write or to count. One day it won’t be difficult anymore and you can just do it without thinking about it.”

Anna considered that then nodded. “Luisa is really good at playing the piano. Much better than me.” I could hear a hint of jealousy. Anna wanted to be the best at everything she did.

“Luisa loves the piano, like you love art. You are the artist, and Luisa is the musician. Everyone’s good at something. That’s wonderful, don’t you think?”

Anna tilted her head and smiled. “Yeah.”

The bell rang. “Wait here. I’ll get the door.”

Anna kept playing as I walked out of the library and toward the front door. Gabby had already opened it and Luisa and Bibi entered. I stroked Luisa’s head. “Why don’t you go ahead to the library?”

She nodded excitedly and dashed off, her dark pigtails bobbing.

I grinned at Bibi. “You look radiant. Dario’s a magician.”

Bibi turned red.

I laughed. “That makes you blush already? He must be even better than I thought.”

“Val,” Bibi said, giggling.

We didn’t get the chance to continue our conversation because the bell rang again. “On time as always,” I said as the piano teacher Mrs. Gatti, the wife of one of Dante’s soldiers, stepped in. After a small curtsey, which she refused to forgo despite my begging, she headed straight for the library to teach Luisa and Anna.

I led Bibi into the living room for our bi-weekly macarons time. We sank down on the sofa. “Have you thought about

the homeschooling?”

Bibi nodded. “Yes. I’d like Luisa and Anna to be taught together.”

“Perfect. I’ll arrange everything.” Dante wanted Anna to be homeschooled until she was ten or twelve because the current situation worried him and I wanted Anna to have her friend at her side. Being around adults all the time wasn’t good for a child her age.

Bibi looked at me as if she was holding something back. I knew her secretive expression. She really wasn’t good at keeping things from me.

“What is it? Are things not going well with Dario?” I couldn’t imagine it being the case. They appeared happy on the outside but I knew sometimes appearances could be deceiving. Still, Bibi would have told me if something was the matter.

“I wanted to wait a bit longer to tell you, but…”

“You’re pregnant!” I said.

Her lips fell open then she nodded. “Only nine weeks along.”

I wrapped my arms around her. “Oh, Bibi, I’m so happy for you and Dario.”

Dario didn’t have children yet, and Bibi wanted more so I had expected Bibi to become pregnant.

We chatted for more than an hour. Anna and Luisa had gone up to play after their lesson and we used the time for us.

But when Dante stepped into the living room with a forced calm expression, words died in my throat. Something in his eyes set off my alarm bells.

“Good afternoon, Bibiana.”

Bibi got up and glanced at her watch. “I should be going. It’s already late.” It wasn’t later than usual but I appreciated her consideration. I accompanied her to the door. “Anna! Luisa!”

Both girls came down a few minutes later. After a short goodbye, Luisa and Bibi left. Dante held Anna in his arms, listening to her recount of today’s piano lesson. I could tell his mind was far away even as he tried to give Anna his full attention. I walked up to them. Leonas was still down for his nap but he too would be awake soon. I searched Dante’s eyes, wondering what was wrong, but he gave a tight smile. “Let’s have dinner at our favorite place.”

“You sure?”

“Yes. I want us to have a family night out. We can talk later.”

“Okay,” I said with a smile. “I’ll dress up. What about you, Anna? You want to get pretty?”

“Yes!” she shouted.

“Can you make Leonas presentable?”

Dante gave me a look as he set Anna down. “I’ll try my best. He’s given me trouble today.”

I laughed then took Anna’s hand. “The girls need to get ready now.” Anna and I hurried up the stairs and into my

walk-in closet where I also kept some of Anna's prettier outfits.

"I want to look like you!" Anna said.

I bit my lip. Anna loved to wear matching outfits. Many people in the Outfit thought it strange, but I tried to ignore their negative voices. "Okay. Let's see what we can do."

I picked a plaid dress for Anna with cute black boots and chose a plaid costume for myself. That way our outfits were similar but didn't scream twins from afar. Then I braided Anna's hair. I wasn't as good at the French braids as Mamma but I tried my best. I let my own down and put on some makeup, then we headed to Leonas' room.

To my surprise, Dante had managed to dress Leonas in Chino pants and a cute button-down shirt as well as sneakers. He was talking quietly to him. Dante seldom raised his voice at our children and even then he never screamed. Anna had always been an obedient child, so we'd never had reason for strictness, but Leonas was already testing our patience on a daily basis. I wondered how long Dante's calm approach would work with our son.

I leaned in the doorway, smiling as I held Anna's hand.

Dante caught me watching then scanned Anna and me appreciatively. "We're heading to dinner with two beautiful ladies, Leonas, we need to be on our best behavior." Leonas didn't pay attention, too distracted by the task of fumbling with Dante's cuffs.

Our favorite restaurant was an elegant but cozy place with the best steak in town. We got our usual table in a nook

where we were shielded from attention.

Leonas and Anna were on their best behavior, as they were most of the time when we were outside. Even Leonas' tantrums usually happened in the safety of our home.

I could tell that Dante enjoyed our family dinner despite the lingering tension in his expression.

Later that night when we lay in each other's arms after sex, I asked, "What happened today? You seemed shaken."

Dante let out a deep sigh that let his chest vibrate under my cheek. "It's Fabiano. He's gone."

I lifted my head to look at Dante's face in the dim glow of the bedside lamp. "Gone?"

"He's run off. That's what Rocco said at least."

"That's ridiculous. Fabiano wanted nothing more than to become a Made Man. Why would he run away from that?"

"Rocco thinks he might have followed in his sisters' footsteps and fled to New York to join the Famiglia."

I shook my head slowly, but part of me thought maybe Rocco was right. Fabiano loved his sisters, even if their relationship had broken off due to the war. His feelings toward his father, on the other hand, were probably less fond. The man had been treating him even worse since Rocco Jr. had been born. "What do you think?"

Dante ran his fingers through my hair then down my arm and waist. "I fear Rocco might be right. Luca would take Fabiano in if Aria asked him to do it."

Dante's lips pinched like they always did when he talked about them. Despite the photos, Luca and Aria still seemed

to be going strong. For a while I'd been worried Luca had hurt Aria because she'd completely disappeared from the public, but then we'd found out that she'd given birth to a daughter and had gone into hiding for protection.

I propped myself up on Dante's chest. "He's only fourteen, Dante. Have you sent people to look for him?"

"Rocco did. He's his son."

"And what happens if they catch him?"

Dante let his head fall back against the cushion and stared up at the ceiling. "By our standards, he's an initiate, Val. He's not a child anymore."

I closed my eyes. Since I had a son, the rules of our world worried me often. Leonas was a little rebel and I honestly hoped he would choose his battles wisely once he was older. "It's strange though, that Fabiano chooses now to run away. Why didn't he follow his sisters when they took Liliana in? He could have gone with them. But he tried to stop them."

"Maybe he didn't. Maybe it was all staged. You know how I've been suspecting we have a mole in the Outfit?"

My eyes opened wide. "You think Fabiano was the mole? But he isn't even a Made Man yet. His knowledge is limited."

"His direct knowledge, yes. But he might have overheard many things in the Scuderi mansion."

"You really think Luca would have used a boy as a spy?"

"If you think Luca would have qualms to put a teenage boy in danger, then I can assure you he doesn't. And in

regard to Fabiano’s worth, I assume his information was better than nothing.”

“But how can we know for sure? What if something happened to the boy?”

“Rocco’s got a few loose contacts to local motorcycle gangs in Luca’s territory. We hope they might pick up something and share information with us in return for goods.”

“Don’t you think it’s horrible how Rocco drove all of his children away? The thought of losing Anna and Leonas like that? It tears my heart out.”

Dante cupped my head, his eyes conveying absolute certainty. “We won’t lose either Anna or Leonas. We’re trying to give them everything they need. I know they’ll always be bound by certain rules and be limited by certain restrictions but I’ll make sure they can have as much freedom as our lifestyle allows. And your love will give them the roots they need.”

“Your love too. Leonas and Anna are always so happy when they get to spend time with you. They love you so much.”

Tenderness flickered in Dante’s eyes. “I’m trying to be a better father than my own. I don’t know if I’m always succeeding.”

“You are,” I said firmly. “How can you even consider comparing yourself to your father. He and you are nothing alike.”

Dante chuckled darkly, his eyes taking in my face almost reverently. “Trust me, Val, I have plenty of my father. But it’s a side of me that you and our children will never get to see.”

I dipped my head forward, nicking his lower lip playfully. “You are everything I want.”

He rolled us over, pressing me into the bed. I slung my leg over his hip. “Can’t let me be on top, can you?” I teased. Dante ground his growing erection against me in response and bit my shoulder lightly. “Don’t play coy, Val. You get wet the moment I force you to surrender.”

God, he was right. I’d tried to ride him a few times out of curiosity but it wasn’t for me. I loved Dante’s dominant side in bed, how he took absolute control. I always got my reward after all.



The next day, the weather was beautiful and warm, the first hint of spring after a too-long winter. Anna and I sat on our bench, dressed in our coats and with a blanket draped over our legs because it was still cold despite the sunshine. Leonas obviously didn’t feel the cold. He ripped his coat off again and threw himself into the sandbox.

Anna giggled, looking up at me. She’d never been this daring and wild. She preferred to watch and consider her actions thoroughly. She snuggled closer to me and hummed

the new song she'd learned in her last lesson. My phone vibrated in my coat pocket and seeing Orazio's name, I took the video call. I wondered if it was an accident because we'd never done a video chat before and even his calls were few and far in between.

I smiled into the lens. "Hi Orazio."

"Uncle Orazio?" Anna piped up, peering at the screen. Since Anna and Leonas were born, I'd seen my brother frequently. My kids loved him, but his relationship to our father still hadn't improved.

"Hey Val," he said, looking and sounding exhausted. His hair was disheveled and dark shadows spread under his eyes. I'd never seen him like that. Orazio always took care of his appearance, which was why so many girls admired him and would have loved to become his wife. "I wanted to call to see Leonas and Anna."

"Hi!" Anna shouted and waved wildly, almost knocking the phone out of my hand.

Orazio smiled slightly but it was off. What made things even stranger was that he was in a car.

"Where are you?"

He glanced to the passenger side briefly then shook his head. "Nowhere important. How are you? How's Leonas?"

I held the phone camera toward the sandbox where Leonas was building what looked like a pyramid. "He's got bees in his bum as usual," I said then turned the camera back on me and Anna who practically pressed her face against mine.

“When will you visit?” she asked.

Orazio’s eyes darted back to the right then his smile became even tenser. He didn’t reply.

“Did you have another fight with Dad? I don’t understand why you two bullheads can’t get along.” Orazio had managed to wiggle out of his promise to settle down with a wife until now, but Dad was close to exploding because of it.

“It’s too late,” he said.

I frowned. “Is it really so bad to marry someone Dad suggests? It can work out.”

“I’m going to marry in a few weeks.”

I wasn’t sure if I’d heard him right. Again his gaze sought whoever sat beside him on the passenger seat. “You want to spring this on our parents?” I whispered. If he married a girl from a soldier family our parents didn’t approve of, that wouldn’t improve his relationship to Papa in the slightest.

“I won’t tell them. They’ll find out, of course, and they won’t approve. Dad has made his standpoint very clear.”

“He knows?”

Orazio laughed darkly. “He doesn’t know that I’m going to marry, or that Lucy and I are together but he knows of Lucy.” The bitter, furious note to his voice startled me.

Anna sank back down, obviously bored by the topic when my insides practically burned up with curiosity and dread. “Lucy?” I repeated. Maybe it was short for Lucilla? Or another Italian name, but deep down I knew it wasn’t.

I swallowed. “You’re in love with an Outsider?”

Orazio grimaced. Suddenly I realized that this call was meant as a goodbye. I felt it deep down. If Orazio was marrying an Outsider, Papa would disinherit him. Unless I could convince Dante to talk to him, even if family matters were off limits for a Capo, but he could do it as son-in-law. “Maybe—”

“No,” Orazio said. “I have to leave, Val. There’s no other way.”

The truth I didn’t want to believe. I lowered my voice. “Orazio, you know the consequences of running away. That’s betrayal.”

Dante may not send out many men to search for Orazio as a favor to me, so maybe my brother could stay undetected. But what could he work? He’d never done anything but been a Made Man. “Let me talk to Dad and Dante. You know that there have been exemptions in the past where Made Men were allowed to marry outsiders.”

“Low soldiers, not the heir to Chicago,” Orazio corrected. “And trust me, there won’t be an exemption for Lucy.”

He glanced toward the side then nodded and a gorgeous girl came into view with pitch black hair… and an exotic face. An Asian girl. No, Dad would never accept her, nor would the still very traditional Outfit. I’d heard enough off-handed comments at social gatherings to know the lingering racism in our circles.

I forced a smile. “Hi Lucy.”

She smiled shyly, then peered up at my brother, and the look that passed between them made me realize nothing could stop Orazio. Nor would I want to get between them.

“Nice to meet you, Valentina,” Lucy said in a soft voice.

Could love ever be a crime? Could wanting to be with your love no matter what be considered betrayal?

“I’ll put in a good word for you with Dante. If you run off to Europe, maybe England, you could be safe.”

Lucy bit her lip, giving my brother a pained look. “I wish we could have met in person.” With that, she disappeared from view.

Orazio’s expression became tight. “Valentina, I’m sorry that I blamed you for my problems with Dad. You did your duty to marry again and somehow that made me even madder for a while. I’m glad I got to see Anna and Leonas one more time.”

“What’s going on, Orazio? I don’t understand.”

“I’m in a safe place so you can tell Dante what I just told you. You don’t have to think you need to protect me. Bye.”

“Bye, Uncle Orazio!” Anna called.

I couldn’t say anything, only watched the screen go black, feeling completely confused. Leonas came running my way, grinning but his good mood didn’t reach me. I stood and caught him as he threw himself into my arms, glad for the distraction and the necessary time it gave me to sort my thoughts. I didn’t understand what Orazio meant with a safe place. Was he already out of the States? For some reason, I

didn’t think he was. The small part of the car I’d seen had looked like Orazio’s BMW.

Anna jogged after me as I walked back into the house. Leonas dropped sand everywhere. “Mom, I’m hungry,” he chimed.

“First, we need to change your diaper.”

Leonas shook his head wildly but I carried him up to his room anyway.

“Who was that girl with Uncle Orazio?” Anna blurted as she followed hot on my heels.

I put Leonas down on the changing table despite his protests. My clothes and the table were covered in sand, and I cursed myself inwardly for being so lost in my thought that I didn’t clean him in the bathroom first.

“Mommy?” Anna asked, standing on her tiptoes and holding onto the edge of the table.

I smiled shakily. “That was his friend.”

“Like Luisa and Sofia are my friends?”

“Yes, like that,” I said.

After changing Leonas’ diaper, we headed downstairs into the kitchen. Zita was in the utility room ironing Dante’s shirts and it was Gabby’s day off, so I had the kitchen to myself. To distract myself and because Anna and Leonas loved them, I prepared French toast with a vanilla-mascarpone crème on top.

Anna helped me whisk the eggs while Leonas dipped his fingers into the sugar and licked them clean. They loved their learning tower and I loved that it gave them the

chance to feel involved when I cooked. We settled at the table and both Leonas and Anna dug in eagerly. They looked utterly content, their faces dusted with sugar and cream. I tried to cling to the sense of peace I felt watching them but my worry over Orazio soon took over. On the one hand, I was happy for him, happy that he'd found someone he loved, but on the other hand, I worried for his future, for his life. What if this was a spur of the moment thing? How long had he even known Lucy? Was she really worth leaving everything behind for? He couldn't just change his mind in a few months when things didn't work out. He'd be considered a traitor and… God, would Dante really kill my brother? What about Papa?

I closed my eyes, terrified for my brother, for my family.

A hand on my shoulder shook me out of my reverie and my eyes shot open. Dante towered over me, his blond brows pulled together in obvious worry. "Are you all right?"

"Mom made us French toast!" Anna said brightly. Dante stroked her hair but his eyes remained on me.

Leonas raised his arms and after a moment Dante bent down and picked him up. For a second, I allowed myself to enjoy the heartwarming scene of Dante holding our son carefully in his arms. I hadn't eaten a bit of my French toast, not feeling hungry. "Do you want some?" I motioned at my plate.

Dante shook his head. "Have you heard something from your brother?"

My eyes widened. I stood slowly. "Why?"

Dante became tense, worry settling on his face. “Because he didn’t show up to a meeting with your dad this morning. I thought you might know what’s going on and it seems I was right.”

“He just called. A few minutes ago.”

“And?” Dante asked carefully as he put Leonas down on the floor before he came over to me. He touched my shoulders, searching my eyes. “What did he want?”

I had a feeling Dante knew something was horribly wrong. What was Orazio doing? I glanced at our children, not sure if I wanted to have this conversation in front of them. I picked up my plate and went over to the sink. Dante followed me.

“We did a video-chat and he told me he had to leave… because he was going to marry a girl named Lucy,” I whispered.

“Goddamnit,” Dante growled, his face flashing with fury.

“Dante?” Cold fear spread in my body.

The way he looked at me made me worried about what he had to say. “It’s a Chinese girl?”

I shrugged. I wasn’t sure of the girl’s nationality but that Dante knew made me wonder how long he’d known about this. “You knew?”

Dante shook his head but his thoughts seemed miles away. “Before we married, your father mentioned his problems with Orazio to me. It was about that girl. Orazio refused to give her up for a long time until your father finally convinced him.”

“How?”

“I don’t know. I wasn’t Capo back then and even if I had been, I wouldn’t have gotten involved as you know.”

“So they’ve been together for years? That makes sense.”

“Does it?” Dante asked angrily. “Your brother is bound by his vow. By betraying the Outfit he risks the life of fellow Made Men.”

“He only wants to be with the woman he loves. How does it hurt his fellow Made Men if he goes into hiding to be with her?”

Dante’s fingers on my shoulders tightened. “Because you know I suspect that there’s a spy among my soldiers. Maybe it wasn’t Fabiano…”

I exhaled sharply. “You think it could be Orazio?”

Dante sighed and pressed our foreheads together. I wrapped my arms around his waist, trembling. “Tell me he wouldn’t do it.”

I wanted to say it but I’d seen the look that had passed between Orazio and Lucy, and I didn’t want to lie to Dante. “I can’t,” I whispered thickly, my eyes prickling.

“Val,” Dante said quietly, sounding tortured. “If Orazio has been helping the Famiglia…”

I didn’t want to imagine it. I couldn’t.

“Do you know where he might be right now?”

I shook my head. “No. But he was in his car.”

Dante cupped my head and closed his eyes for a moment.

“Please don’t kill him.”

Dante took a deep breath. “I’d do almost anything for you, Val. I’ve chosen you over the Outfit before and part of me wants to do it again, but if Orazio betrayed the Outfit by working with the Famiglia, I have to punish him accordingly.”

“Mamma will be devastated… and Papa. God, I can’t even think about it. Maybe it’s not as we think.” I swallowed, trying hard not to cry, not to lose it before I knew all the details.

Anna headed our way with her empty plate. I blinked hastily and swallowed, then forced a smile. “Do you want Mommy’s toast?”

Anna shook her head. “I’m full.” She glanced between us as if she could sense that something was going on. I’d noticed it before. Anna was perceptive, especially when it came to gauging people’s emotions. It was a beautiful talent but also worrying because I wanted to protect her from so many things in our world and her empathy would make it harder for me to succeed.

PART 6

Dante

Word about Orazio's disappearance spread like wildfire in the Outfit. Pietro had tried to exert damage control but the men who'd worked with Orazio had obviously spread speculations. Rubbing my temples, I stared down at a report about an attack on a storage facility and lab near Cleveland.

"When's my father going to be here?" Valentina asked, carrying Leonas against her chest as she stepped in. He was only in diapers and a shirt, and already twisting on her arm to get back down and undress more. She looked tired, which wasn't surprising because her worry over her brother had kept her up at night and during the day Anna and Leonas kept Val busy so she couldn't try to catch up on sleep then. With the escalation of the Famiglia situation and Orazio's defection, my workload had doubled and even as I tried, I wasn't much of a help. I stood and walked over to her. "Do you want me to take care of him for a bit so you can take a hot shower and have a coffee in peace?"

Val raised her eyebrows, looking down at herself. "Do I look that bad?"

I touched her hip, my thumb slipping under her cashmere sweater to feel the smooth skin beneath then I leaned down to give her a lingering kiss. "You are beautiful as always, Val."

She pursed her lips. "I don't feel it right now. I feel like a mess."

"This is difficult," I said quietly and took Leonas from her. His eyes snapped up to me and he grinned. "Daddy, play in

garden!”

“So when’s my father going to be here? I know you’re going to discuss the Orazio situation with him again.” This was another reason for Val’s sleepless nights.

“In ten minutes. Your brother isn’t our only topic. The war with the Famiglia is taking up many of our resources.”

Val nodded slowly. “You don’t have any hints where he could be.”

“Not yet.” Val regarded me as if she wasn’t sure I was telling the truth. She had every reason to be wary. While I didn’t have a trace to Orazio’s whereabouts yet, I wouldn’t have told her even if I had. When I caught Orazio, I wouldn’t tell Val. Giovanni and I had agreed on that.

Leonas squirmed in my arms. “Please down!”

I set him down and he stumbled toward my desk chair, trying to climb on it.

“Okay,” she said. “I’ll grab a shower now.” With a last glance at Leonas and me, she slipped out of my office. I glanced down at my son, remembering Giovanni’s shaken expression when he’d found out Orazio had run off. Giovanni didn’t know it yet, but I wouldn’t tell him if I ever caught his son either. Maybe Orazio was clever enough to go into hiding somewhere we didn’t have contacts, Scandinavia or Asia would be good options. The desk chair was spinning around itself, making it impossible Leonas to climb up. I walked over to him and held the chair by its backrest. Leonas finally managed to pull himself up then throned on my chair with a proud grin. His blond hair was all over the

place, definitely in need of a cut. So far it hadn't darkened much, but when I had been his age my hair had been lighter too.

I tried to imagine how I would feel if he'd run away from his family, from his duties. The mere idea hit me like a punch in the stomach. Maybe Giovanni should have been more lenient when it came to Orazio's wish to be with Lucy. But the Outfit would have been against the union no doubt. An Asian woman, or really any woman without Italian ancestors, would have a hard time being accepted in our circles.

I hoped this would change by the time Leonas was old enough to fall in love.

The bell rang. Anna's delighted scream followed and despite the tension in my body, I couldn't help but smile. I picked up Leonas and walked toward the front door where Giovanni was hugging Anna to his chest and lifting her up while Gabby held open the door for him. He seemed to have aged ten years since the news about Orazio's disappearance. "There's my favorite princess," Giovanni said as he kissed Anna's cheeks. She beamed all over her face then grinned at me with flushed cheeks. Giovanni headed my way, the smile becoming tenser. He set Anna down then pressed another kiss to the crown of her head. "Your dad and I have business to discuss, bambina, but I'll read you a story later, how about that?"

Anna pouted but nodded. I stroked her head. "Why don't you help Gabby?"

Anna nodded even though she looked disappointed. Giovanni tousled Leonas' head who giggled in response.

Gabby grabbed Anna's hand and led her into the kitchen.

Giovanni peered down at Leonas squirming in my arms. "He's already grown so much."

I handed Leonas to Giovanni who cradled him to his chest with a wistful smile. Leonas calmed down for a moment. "I remember when I held Orazio for the first time…" He fell silent and I could tell he was fighting with himself. I squeezed his shoulder. "Maybe it's for the best if he stays in hiding. Right now, we don't have the resources to waste on searching for him."

Giovanni looked up, realizing what I was saying. I wouldn't actively search for Orazio. That was my gift to him and Val.

"If you catch him, he'll be seen as a traitor…"

I sighed. "We'll cross that bridge when we reach it. As of now, we don't know if he did anything that can be construed as betrayal." Running away from the mob was betrayal but if that was his only crime, maybe I could be lenient, even if that would send a fatal message to other Made Men considering defecting their duties. As it was the best outcome for all of us would be if Orazio would never show up again.

I led Giovanni into my office and he sank down in an armchair with Leonas on his lap who freed himself and stormed toward my desk chair. This time he managed to

climb up without my help which caused the chair to spin around itself with him. Leonas laughed in delight.

Giovanni sighed. “What are we going to do once I retire? Who’s going to be Underboss?”

“We still have many years to decide on that. You won’t retire anytime soon.”

“I’ll do my best. Livia already tortures me with a low-carb diet. As if a real man can’t deal with pasta and bread.”

I stifled a smile.

Rocco would arrive in thirty minutes for our meeting. I always met with Giovanni a bit earlier because I trusted him the most and because I enjoyed our conversations.

“The attack on the Cleveland lab was a success,” I told him.

Giovanni nodded distractedly as he stood and spun the desk chair around, causing Leonas’ laughter to grow in volume. Luckily, he was still too young to understand the majority of what we discussed. Once he got older, I’d have to be careful what I shared in his presence until he reached an age that allowed him to deal with the problems of our world and keep secrets. Val wanted Leonas to remain shielded as long as possible but I needed to prepare him.

My phone rang. It was Rocco, which made my pulse speed up at once. He wouldn’t call so shortly before a meeting unless something had happened. “Yes?”

“I’m on my way, Dante. I have bad news.”

“What is it?”

“I’ve been reaching out to the MCs in Famiglia territory. They are impossible to negotiate with and stupid as toast but they can’t keep their big mouths shut. And they mentioned a very unfortunate development…”

My patience was running thin quickly. “Spill.”

“Orazio has found shelter in the Famiglia. Rumors has it he’ll take their tattoo and serve under Vitiello.”

My eyes darted to Giovanni who watched me with a small frown. Despite Leonas’ loud protest, he stopped spinning the chair and came toward me.

I swallowed. “Is this certain?”

“They mentioned a pregnant Asian cunt, their words not mine, at his side. They moved into an apartment building in the Upper East Side. High security.”

I looked away from Giovanni, feeling as if someone had punched my stomach. My fingers on the armrest tightened as fury and trepidation overwhelmed me. This was the worst possible news.

“I’m sorry, Dante,” Rocco said. “I know what it feels like to be betrayed by family. The Famiglia has stolen too many of ours. I’ll be at the mansion in ten minutes.”

“All right.” I hung up, then stared down at my fingers clutching my phone. This war had become very personal. More personal than I’d ever thought it could be.

“Dante?” Giovanni asked quietly.

I met his gaze, wondering how I’d tell him that his son had betrayed us in a way that made it impossible for me to show mercy. And to be honest, I had absolutely no intention

to do so, even my love for Valentina didn’t change that. “Orazio has defected to the Famiglia.”

The color drained from Giovanni’s face. He shook his head slowly then stared toward Leonas.

I could only imagine what he felt now.

“I can’t tell Livia. I just can’t,” he rasped as he sagged down in the armchair. “She’s already been broken-hearted when she only thought he’d run away, but now… this? God.” He covered his eyes with hand and took a deep breath. When he looked at me after a couple of moments, his expression was more controlled. “What are we going to do?”

“We have to tell Val and Livia. News about this will spread. It’s impossible to keep something of this proportion a secret.”

Giovanni nodded but he didn’t say anything. His hands were shaking. I considered saying something to ease his pain but words seemed meaningless. What could I possibly say that would make losing your only son easier? Especially because I was the man who’d have to hunt him down and kill him.

Giovanni stood and I did the same. He came toward me on unsteady legs and straightened his shoulders as if he’d come to a decision. “I’ll step down from my position as Captain. I don’t have an heir… my son… my son’s become a traitor to the cause. Our men will ask you to find a new Captain who can take over.”

Leonas hopped off the chair and stumbled toward us. He hugged my leg, grinning up at us. I grasped Giovanni’s

forearm hard. “I won’t allow you to give up your position, Giovanni. You have a duty to fulfill to the Outfit, to me, and to our family. I don’t care what anyone says. My word is law and I want you as my Underboss. No discussion.”

Giovanni hesitated then he inclined his head. “If that’s what you want.”

“It is.”

“I have to go to Livia now. You are right. She needs to hear it from me and I need some time to come to terms with the news too. You don’t have to bring me to the door. Take care of Leonas.” Giovanni stroked Leonas’ head with a pained smile before he hurried out of the room.

“Daddy! Grandpa, leave.”

“I know,” I said quietly. Leonas frowned then he rushed back to the chair.

Valentina appeared in the doorway, looking confused, her hair still damp and piled on top of her head. “I hurried so I could say hi to my father but he practically fled the house. What’s going on?”

I wasn’t sure how to tell her the horrible truth. My eyes darted to Leonas in my chair. He yawned and rubbed his eyes.

Val stiffened. “Dante, you’re scaring me… is this about Orazio?”

I moved closer. “Let’s bring Leonas into bed for his nap and then I’ll tell you.”

“Dante,” Val whispered.

I touched her shoulder. “Later.”

Val nodded mechanically and watched as I picked up Leonas who rested his cheek in the crook of my neck, a clear sign it was time for him to rest. “Come, Val.”

We walked in silence upstairs and I lowered Leonas into his bed. I brushed his hair out of his face then straightened. Without a word, I led Val into the corridor and stepped close to her, cradling her face. Her eyes swam with fear. I wished she didn’t have reason to feel that way.

“Our contacts in Famiglia territory informed us that Orazio showed up in New York where they took him in.”

Val’s lips parted but she didn’t say anything. Disbelief followed by horror flashed across her beautiful face.

“I’m sorry, Val.”

She shook her head slowly. “That means he’s a traitor…? I don’t understand why he’d join the Famiglia. Why not run away?”

“I think he might have been working with them for a while.”

Val pressed her forehead against my chest, shuddering. “Why couldn’t he just run?”

“His girlfriend is pregnant.”

Val peered up and realization settled on her features. “He wants to protect them. Being on the run with a child is impossible. He probably thought they’d be safest in the Famiglia.”

I kept my face neutral. Val needed to make sense of this and her reasoning certainly had merit. Orazio had probably acted with the goal to protect his pregnant girlfriend, but he

was far from safe. He would be hunted. I couldn’t sit back when the son of a high-ranking Outfit member defected to our enemies. I needed to eliminate him as soon as possible to make an example out of him. This could spin out of control if I wasn’t careful.

Val searched my eyes. Even without saying a word, I knew what she was hoping to find, but not this time. Mercy wasn’t going to wait for Orazio once I got him. “You’re going to hunt him now, won’t you?”

“I have to.”

She shook her head. “You don’t. You are the Capo. You can determine what direction the Outfit takes in the future. Why plunge everyone into a bloody war that won’t lead us anywhere? Why can’t we just ignore each other? There doesn’t have to be peace between the Outfit and the Famiglia as long as we just don’t kill each other.”

“Because Luca made this personal. He killed one of my men, he kidnapped Rocco’s daughter, and now he took in my brother-in-law. I won’t ignore this, Val. My men expect me to show strength, and accepting when others disrespect me and the Outfit isn’t showing strength. They’ll be met with the full force of my brutality and vengeance.”

Val stepped back and slowly made her way into our bedroom where she sank down on the bed. “What did my father say?” Her voice was forced calm, and I hated that she brought up a barrier between us. I followed her. Her gaze was directed at her hands which fumbled with her sweater. She didn’t want me to read her.

“He’s going to tell your mother now. He understands the consequences of Orazio’s actions.”

Val huffed. “Consequences of his actions. Could you sound any more blasé?” Her eyes flashed up to mine, full of anger and anguish. “This is my brother, Dante. It’s not an enemy, not a traitor, not a name on a list that you can cross out as if it never meant anything. And no matter what Papa says, this hits him hard. And Mamma…” Val turned away from me once more, gripping the edge of the bed tightly, her shoulder shaking.

I forced down my own anger and frustration. Val had a lot to stomach, not to mention two small demanding children to take care of. She was exhausted and emotionally vulnerable. “I’m aware of that. What do you expect me to do, Val? I’m Capo. My men expect me to lead them through this crisis. A crisis, which I might add, might have been made worse by Orazio’s actions.”

She pushed up to her feet once more. “He did it for the woman he loves and his unborn child. What would you do to protect our children?”

I jerked her against my chest. “I’d do anything to protect you, Anna and Leonas. Absolutely anything, which is why I need to make sure the Outfit stays strong. Luca won’t hesitate to tear down everything I built. The Outfit is Leonas’ legacy. It’s our family’s legacy. I won’t go lenient on people who risk the safety of our family.”

“Maybe we’d be safer without a war…”

“Val,” I growled. “Luca began this war and I’ll end it eventually, on my terms and when the Outfit comes out on top. Don’t blame me for what your brother did. He knew the consequences of his actions and he accepted them. How do you know he didn’t pass on information about you, about Anna and Leonas to Luca? We don’t even know the extent of his betrayal yet.”

Val considered my words but I could see that she didn’t want to believe it. “Do you really think Orazio would have told Luca anything about Anna and Leonas?”

I cupped the back of her head until she looked at me again. “I don’t know and that’s the problem. Now that Orazio is in New York, you can be certain he gives Luca anything he knows. He needs to stay useful to warrant protection.”

Val sank against me and let out a shuddering sob. I wrapped my arms around her as she cried. I understood her sorrow and it pained me to see her like that, but I didn’t feel anything but anger for Orazio’s actions. He wouldn’t be met with mercy if I ever got my hands on him. He was no longer family. He was the enemy, even if Val couldn’t see it that way.

Valentina

My stomach tightened painfully when Enzo pulled up in front of my parents’ house. Anna bounced excitedly in her

seat and even Leonas, who had been bawling the entire ride, looked delighted when he recognized the house. I'd only briefly talked to Mamma on the phone last night. Her voice had sounded hoarse from crying but she'd tried to sound composed.

I took Leonas out of his seat and Enzo helped Anna out of the car. The door of the house opened and Mamma stepped out, dressed in black as if she was already mourning Orazio's death. Maybe this was her way of dealing with the situation, pretending he was dead so she wouldn't have to worry about his fate anymore. If the Outfit ever caught him, death definitely wasn't the worst option. Bile traveled up my throat considering Dante might torture my own brother.

I couldn't linger on the thought, not if I wanted to keep my sanity.

Anna ripped away from Enzo and stormed toward her grandma. I kissed my mother's cheek and gave her a shaky smile. Her eyes were puffy and red, but her expression was proud and determined as she turned to Enzo. "Why don't you go ahead to the kitchen. The staff's having lunch."

Enzo nodded then glanced at me for confirmation. I gave a small nod then followed my mother and Anna, who told her everything about her new finger colors. Leonas was particularly fussy today and the moment I sat on the couch, he slid off my lap and discovered the living room. My mother had a vast collection of expensive vases and porcelain figurines and usually she followed Leonas wherever he went

to stop him from smashing one of them. Today she didn't even glance his way, which showed how shaken she was.

Anna sat happily on her grandma's lap.

"How are you?" I asked softly. We couldn't really talk with Anna in the room. She understood more than enough already and this situation was definitely too much for a child her age. I kept an eye on Leonas but so far he hadn't grabbed anything.

Mamma shrugged, another thing she never did unless seriously out of it. Shrugging wasn't something a lady should do. "I try to focus on the positive. On you and my beautiful grandchildren."

"And Papa?"

"He's trying to be strong for me, but for a man to lose his heir, his only son… especially like this." Her voice died away. "What about Dante?"

I considered my reply. "He's trying to protect the Outfit."

"As he should. Your father and Rocco are helping him, that's a good thing."

I wasn't sure really. Rocco, in particular had been trying to stir up the conflict between the Outfit and the Famiglia since Liliana ran off with Romero. He wouldn't be the voice of reason, and my father was too shaken to make wise decisions. Dante wanted revenge. He wanted Orazio's death, even if he didn't say it outright, at least not to me. While I understood him, my heart was torn apart by conflicting emotions. I couldn't bear the idea that Orazio might be caught and tortured to death for what he'd done. On the

other hand, I was furious on Dante's behalf. Orazio should have chosen another way, not the Famiglia. He knew how much Luca and Dante hated each other. It was like a slap in Dante's face that his brother-in-law was now part of the Famiglia.

How much more would this war take from our family?

THE FIFTH BETRAYAL

Almost six years later

PART 1

Dante

The wild laughter and screams of Leonas, Rocco Jr., and Riccardo carried into my office. Giovanni chuckled.

"Those boys are a wild combination."

"They are," I said.

Valentina’s voice rang out, and the screams stopped.

“Rocco’s around my age, I really don’t know how he has the energy to raise two small boys.” A hint of wistfulness crossed his face but he hid it quickly. Orazio had been part of the Famiglia for five years now. Giovanni never talked about him, unless Rocco mentioned him.

“I think they are less boisterous at home than they are here,” I said, my mouth twisting. Rocco’s parenting techniques hadn’t improved much from what Val told me. Maria often confided in her during their weekly meetups about Rocco’s lack of patience. He never hit his children or wife in front of me, fully aware of my stance on the matter. I’d tried to bridge the subject as delicately as possible without risking that he realized Maria revealed what was going on behind closed doors. I doubted it had changed much.

He considered himself strict, not abusive. I was a strict father but I certainly handled punishment very differently to Rocco.

“How’s baby number three coming along?” he asked conspiratorially.

Anna had let it slip that Val and I wanted a third baby and now Giovanni and Livia didn’t stop asking.

The bell rang and immediately silence reigned in the house.

“I think Rocco just arrived.”

Giovanni sighed. “Let’s hope he brings good news. If I hear one more word about the Camorra’s victory march in

the West, I’m going to lose it.”

The rise of the Camorra in the West was a worrying development. After Benedetto’s death a few years ago, I’d thought the remaining Falcone clan spread out in the different cities would tear into each other and weaken the Camorra. And initially that had been the case, but then Remo Falcone had grabbed power and went on a killing spree. Now he and his brothers ruled over the West. They hadn’t attacked my territory yet so I had ignored them for the most part. They were volatile, brutal madmen like their father and I hoped they’d eventually kill each other off and solve the problem themselves.

When Rocco stepped in, I knew we wouldn’t hear good news today.

His face was red and covered with sweat, and the top button of his shirt was open as if he’d had trouble breathing.

I pushed out of the chair. “Rocco?”

“You should sit down again,” he muttered.

Narrowing my eyes, I walked toward him. “What is it?”

“I got updates from our contacts in Vegas and New York.” He let out a bitter laugh. “We’re being screwed over on both fronts.”

“For God’s sake, what is going on?” Giovanni said.

“Orazio has been made Underboss of Boston.”

Giovanni’s expression became stone but for briefest moment pain flared up in his eyes.

I didn’t move, trying to keep my emotions in check, even as a wave of fury rolled through me. “You said on both

fronts?”

Rocco laughed again and staggered over to the desk where he dropped a few photos. His fingers turned white from their tight grip on the edge of the desk. I moved closer to get a look at the photos. It took me a moment to understand what I was seeing. A fighting cage with a blond man in the center.

Fabiano Scuderi with raised arms, celebrating a victory over a bleeding opponent.

I glanced at Rocco who looked close to an outburst. “Where was this taken?”

A suspicion was trickling through slowly. One territory was famous for their death fights.

“Las Vegas.” Rocco jabbed his finger at another photo. I picked it up and took a closer look. Fabiano had the tattoo of an eye and the knife on his forearm. The tattoo of the Camorra.

“He defected to the fucking Camorra! And that bastard Falcone took him in. First Luca with Orazio, and now Falcone with Fabiano! This must stop.”

Giovanni didn’t say anything. If my own body hadn’t gone into a sort of fury-fueled state of shock, I would have asked if he was okay. He looked pale.

“What’s he doing in the Camorra?” I asked, satisfied to hear my voice cold and smooth. No sign of my inner turmoil.

“What does it matter?” Rocco roared. “My own flesh and blood has become a dirty traitor. I want him dead!”

Pure hatred shone in Rocco's dark eyes. But it wasn't the only emotion I detected. In their depth, I found animal fear. What was Rocco so afraid of? His reputation? That I would remove him from his position as Consigliere because of this development? Or something else? "We have to attack the Camorra, Dante. Right away. We can't show weakness. Luca and Remo are making fools of us. We must react. We must kill Fabiano and Orazio."

I agreed. Both Fabiano and Orazio needed to die, but not before I had talked to them. I needed to know what had happened, and I needed to know everything they knew about the Famiglia and the Camorra.

"We have to gather more information before we act, Rocco. This isn't something we can risk without a foolproof plan. And right now, neither you nor Giovanni are in a state of mind to discuss plans."

Rocco shook his head. "We can't wait!"

"Careful with that tone," I growled. "We *will* wait and you'll gather more info before we discuss tactics. Understood?"

Rocco moved even closer. "You owe me this. Remember, Jacopo."

I grabbed his throat and shoved him against the desk. "One more word, Rocco, and you'll die before Fabiano. I won't tolerate your disrespect. And remember that you owe me more than I do."

Giovanni hovered a few steps from us, a hand on his gun. He needn't have worried. I didn't need his help against

Rocco. I made sure I stayed fit, Rocco on the other hand only tried to stay in shape by taking a young girl in his bed.

“Understood?” I hissed.

“Yes,” Rocco got out. I released him and he massaged his throat. “Sorry, Capo. This has been a shock.”

“Find out more information and once you’ve calmed down, we’ll figure out what we can do.”

Rocco nodded and left. I followed after him, wary of his emotional state.

“Maria! Get the boys. We’re leaving!” he barked.

Maria hurried into the lobby, the two boys in front of her. Rocco Jr. and Riccardo were four and five, and looked like twins. Riccardo ducked his head but Rocco frowned. “But we were playing with Leonas.”

Rocco slapped his older son. “Do I look like I care?”

Val gave me a horrified look as she appeared in the doorway behind Maria.

“It’s not a sign of strength to hurt the people you need to protect,” Leonas muttered the words I’d told him several times.

Rocco glared at my son but then quickly smoothed his face and gave me a tight smile. “See you soon.”

Without another word, he walked out. Maria quickly pushed the boys out as well and hurried after him.

Val shook her head and stroked Leonas’ head. He came over to me. “Why can’t you order him to treat his family nicely?”

I sighed. “A Capo can’t get involved in family matters.”

“That’s stupid!” Leonas muttered, stomping his foot.

“Do not take that tone with me,” I said sharply.

Leonas snapped his mouth shut, eying me warily. I wasn’t in a state of mind for a discussion with him today.

“I have to work,” I clipped and returned to my office. Giovanni sat in his usual chair again, looking out of the window.

I closed the door and released a long breath.

Giovanni slanted me a look. “Maybe this is God’s way to punish us.”

I walked over to the liquor cabinet and poured us generous glasses of Scotch. “I don’t believe in a higher power. That won’t change now. My mother would probably say we’re cursed.” I laughed bitterly and downed a considerable amount of the burning liquid before I handed Giovanni a glass.

“I’m not a believer either, but sometimes I wonder…”

“What kind of message would it send to punish us for our sins by favoring other sinners?” Luca and Remo certainly deserved hell as much as I did.

“It’s good that your father doesn’t realize what’s going on anymore.”

“Dementia turns out to be his blessing,” I said sarcastically. It spared me his disapproval anyway.

I perched on the edge of the desk, downing the rest of my drink. “What do you think should I do?”

Giovanni looked surprised. “Don’t you think I’m too emotionally involved to give you advice?”

“Who of us isn’t emotionally involved at this point, Giovanni? I’m fucking furious over this development. I want to torture and kill until the fire in my veins abates. Do you think I’m in a state to make strategic decisions?”

“You are Capo, but you are human too.”

I chuckled without joy. “I’m not without failure, that much is clear. Two high-ranking sons in enemy famiglias.” I poured myself more scotch. I couldn’t remember the last time I’d had more than a glass.

“I don’t know what to tell you. I don’t know if killing them will change anything. The damage is done.”

“Someone needs to bleed for this. I have to make sure my men know I’ll punish them harshly if they break their vow.”

Giovanni pushed to his feet. “Over the years, I made my peace with the situation. For Livia and for Val, and even for myself.”

“Then you’ve come farther than I have. Peace is the last thing on my mind.”

Giovanni smiled sadly. “I know. And I’m at your side no matter what you decide. Just remember that a war on two fronts might rip the Outfit apart. All I want is for our family to be safe.”

“Trust me, Giovanni, my family’s safety is my top priority.”

Val, Leonas and Anna were always at the back of my head when I made crucial decisions, decisions that might lead to brutal retaliation.

“If you excuse me now, I need to figure out a way to break this to Livia.” He sighed. “We need good news.”

I didn’t say anything, too torn between blinding rage and despair. If it were just me I had to worry about, I’d attack Boston and kill Orazio, then move on to Vegas to finish Fabiano. But I wasn’t alone.

I downed the rest of my drink.

Giovanni slipped out and closed the door. I slanted a glance over to the photos. Why had Fabiano chosen the Camorra and not the Famiglia? It made absolutely no sense. Back when he’d run away, the Camorra had been in shambles. He couldn’t hope to find anything in the West except for a painful death. Luca would have taken him in, for Aria, to spite me…

A new wave of rage boiled up. Luca risked a lot by making Orazio Underboss. Not only was he born into the Outfit but his wife wasn’t Italian. His Famiglia couldn’t be happy about that development.

Of course, I knew why he did it. To taunt me.

A knock sounded, tearing me from my thoughts.

Val stepped in without waiting for me to invite her in. It was a common occurrence but today my patience had run thin. “I didn’t ask you to come in.”

Val raised her eyebrows then crossed her arms in front of her chest. “I’m not one of your soldiers, Dante, so don’t treat me like one of them.”

I gritted my teeth. She was right. I shouldn’t unleash my anger on her, but right now I felt close to detonating and

didn’t want her close.

She took a step closer, but I shook my head.

“I need time to think.”

“What happened? My father and Rocco looked like they’d seen a ghost. Is it about Orazio?”

“Valentina,” I said sharply. “I don’t feel like talking now. I really need to think.”

“Very well,” Val said, her expression making it very clear that it wasn’t. “If you’ve calmed down, maybe then we can have a conversation between partners. I’m not in the mood to be treated like one of your subjects.” She turned before I could say more and left the room, throwing the door shut with more force than was necessary.

I grabbed the edge of the desk, closing my eyes. I hated fighting with Val.

Valentina

“What’s gotten into Dad?” Leonas asked curiously when I stepped into the library where I’d sent Anna and him so they could practice their instruments. Leonas’ pressed the piano keys with little enthusiasm and Anna, too, only randomly tugged at the strings of her harp. She had never warmed up to the piano, so we’d switched her to the harp two years ago, with success.

“He’s just a bit stressed. He’s got plenty of work to do.”

“It’s because Uncle Orazio is a traitor?”

I frowned, wondering where Anna had picked that up. It was impossible to keep everything from them. At only nine and six, my children knew more than I wanted them to.

“I don’t know. Don’t worry about it, all right? Everything is going to be fine. Your dad just needs some time to work in peace.”

“Okay,” Anna mumbled and began to play a beautiful song on her harp.

Leonas got up from the piano bench and walked toward me. I ran my hand through his hair, which had gotten long again, so he had to blow it out of his eyes constantly. “When I’m Capo, I’ll fire Rocco’s dad. I don’t want him as my Consigliere.”

I stifled a smile and hugged him to me. “That’s still a long time to go. I’m sure he’ll have retired by then.”

“If he doesn’t, I’ll just have him killed.”

I froze. “Leonas, don’t talk like that.”

He looked up curiously. “Why not? It’s the truth. Dad kills people all the time.”

Anna tugged harder at the strings of her harp and hummed along to the melody.

I lowered my voice and gave him a stern look. “Who said that?”

“Rocco and Riccardo. Their father talks to them about a lot of stuff. And I’ve overheard Enzo and Taft in the kitchen too.”

“Don’t believe everything you hear.”

He tilted his head. “But it’s true, right? The mob kills people and Dad tells his soldiers who. Like traitors and people he doesn’t like.”

I wasn’t sure what to tell him. He was six, a small boy, and yet he knew these things, talked about death as if it was something ordinary. I swallowed. “You know you shouldn’t talk about these things with other people, right?”

“I know,” Leonas said. “You and Dad always say that we need to keep it a secret. I never tell Outsiders anything.”

I glanced at my watch. “Go back to your piano practice now. Are you done with your homework?”

Leonas made a sullen face. “Yeah.” I pushed him gently toward the piano then headed toward Anna who stared at her fingers with forced concentration. I squatted beside her stool. Her long brown hair trailed down her back and I gently smoothed it out. Anna turned toward me, her blue eyes swimming with worry. Whenever she looked at me, my breath stilled for a moment. She was such a beautiful girl, inside and outside.

“Does Dad kill every traitor? Even family?”

Anna had loved Orazio and she had been sad when he’d disappeared. I wished she’d have never found out he’d become a traitor. “Dad tries to be a good leader for his men and a good father for you and Leonas, Anna. Don’t worry about these things. They don’t concern our life.”

It was a lie of course. The mob ruled over every aspect of our life.

Anna pursed her lips. “It’s why I’m not allowed to go to a normal school.”

She was right.

“It’s because you are a girl and can’t protect yourself,” Leonas butted in.

Anna glowered at him. “You can’t protect yourself either!”

“Can too. That’s why I can go and you can’t!”

“Enough, Leonas. Focus on your practice.” I touched Anna’s hand. “Your Dad is a bit more protective about us girls than about Leonas.”

It had led to an argument between us when Leonas had started private school almost two years ago while Anna kept being home-schooled but Dante hadn’t budged. He wanted Leonas to be surrounded by other kids, so he’d learn to assert himself. Anna, on the other hand, remained in her sheltered cocoon at home.

“Do you want to attend Leonas’ school?”

She bit her lip and nodded.

“We’ll see what we can do. Maybe next year.”

“Okay,” she said. I stood and left them to their practice.

I wouldn’t start a discussion about school options with Dante today. He wasn’t in a state of mind to do so. Instead, I headed into my office to make plans for my upcoming visit to our biggest brothel, one frequented by Chicago’s elite, mostly politicians.



The kids and I had dinner alone, which almost never happened anymore. I refrained from knocking at Dante’s door to ask him to join us. He knew we always ate at the same time.

Once the kids were in bed, I changed into my nightgown but sleep evaded me, so I headed back to my office to work some more but shortly before midnight I decided to look for Dante once more. He couldn’t hide in his office forever.

I knocked and again barged in without waiting for a reply. It annoyed Dante, but sometimes it was the best way to get a quick reaction from him and not give him time to compose himself. I hated it when he tried to put up a mask in front of me, even if he only did it to protect me.

Annoyance flashed across Dante’s face. He was bent over the desk which was covered in a wild array of papers. His jacket hung over his chair and his vest lay on the floor beside his feet. Usually he never let his clothes drop to the ground. That he didn’t care showed how occupied his mind was. “Val, I told you I need to work.”

A half empty whiskey tumbler sat precariously close to the edge of the desk where Dante seemed to have put it down without much care. His narrowed eyes took me in and something in them sent a little shiver down my back. Slowly, he dragged his gaze over my body. Barefoot and in my

nightgown, he had a lot to take in. “It’s midnight. Come to bed.”

He straightened with a look somewhere between anger and a familiar hunger. The top two buttons of his shirt were open and he’d rolled his sleeves up, revealing muscular forearms. I walked closer and his eyes followed the shift of my hips then drifted higher to my breasts. My nipples hardened under his scrutiny. “When will you learn to do what I say?”

I stopped on the other side of the desk. “When you start taking better care of yourself. It’s late. You need to rest.”

“I don’t want to rest,” he said in a voice I felt right between my legs. Whatever had happened today, and I’d find out what it was—later—had shaken up Dante more than anything had in a while. He was tense and angry. He needed to let off steam and seeing him like that turned me on.

Dante surprised me by leaning across the desk, grabbing my neck and pulling me in for a harsh kiss. When he pulled back, both hunger and anger had intensified in his eyes. “Fuck it, Val. You are too damn stubborn.”

I could tell that Dante had every intention of punishing me today. It had become our own little role play, sometimes more serious than other times. It was a chance for both of us to relieve tension, and Dante needed that today.

Dante released me and took a sip from his scotch before he ordered. “Get changed. I expect you to be ready when I arrive.”

Biting my lip, I hurried upstairs and put on a flimsy Negligee that barely covered my butt, panties with a slit in the crotch for easy access and suspenders. We'd given up heels a while ago. They just made things too uncomfortable.

Just waiting for Dante in our bedroom, I got already wet. When he finally stepped inside with an expression of dark hunger and dominance, I had to stop myself from throwing myself at him. "Grab onto the bedpost. Your back to me."

I obeyed at once and clamped my hands around the wooden post as Dante's shoes clicked on the floorboards. Dante's heat pressed into me and he bound my hands to the post with a satin band. He tugged at my arms, then gave a satisfied sound when I couldn't free myself. With my arms over my head, I waited for Dante's next move. He wrapped a shawl around my eyes, taking my sight. I shivered at the loss of this sense.

I loved our little role plays. They kept things interesting even after years of marriage and two kids.

Then Dante stepped back, depriving me of his warmth.

"Bend your back and spread your legs wider."

I did as he demanded and waited. I was already so eager for his touch, for his cock, it was driving me insane.

The rustling of clothes and soft click of his Budapesters told me he was close, but I couldn't feel him yet. A finger dipped between my folds and I bit back a moan. "I love it when you give me easy access to your pussy." He dragged his finger over my opening, drawing out my wetness. My

teeth dug into my lower lip to keep me from making a sound.

“You’re always dripping for me, Val, aren’t you?” he rasped, pulled back and I heard him lick his finger clean. I shuddered, jutting my ass out even more, a silent beg.

“You tried my patience today, Val. I won’t make this easy for you.” His palm slid up my inner thigh then his mouth followed, hot and wet. I whimpered. “Please.”

“No sound,” he growled, and I became even more aroused. My body hummed with need, my toes curling as my insides tightened in anticipation for Dante’s touch. He released a hot breath and trailed his tongue along the edge of my suspender. I bit my lip, desperate and eager, and close to losing it. If my hands weren’t tied, I would have plunged my own fingers into me but as it was, I had to submit to Dante’s torture. He bit my skin lightly, making me moan against the post. And then finally, he touched two fingers to my opening and pushed in slowly, gently. But I needed more. I jerked my hips.

“No.”

I stilled, whimpering as Dante slowed his fingers even more. His breath was hot against my inner thigh. I knew he was watching closely as he slid his fingers into my pussy and the knowledge alone tripled my lust. “Spread your legs wider.”

I did and Dante’s deep exhale was the best reward. His fingers were sheathed all the way in me and my muscles contracted around him, begging for friction, for him to slam

into me, to touch my clit. Instead, Dante slowly rotated his fingers, which felt amazing, but wasn't enough, not nearly enough. "Patience," he drawled as if he could read my mind, or more likely read my eager body. I wanted his tongue so badly, and then his cock. I could barely think straight anymore.

He extracted his fingers slowly and then he stood. "Open your mouth." He slid his fingers past my lips, allowing me to taste myself. I used my chance and circled his fingers with my tongue, then sucked them like I would his cock if only he'd let me have it.

He unbound my hands and guided me toward the bed. I sank down then lay back, waiting for him. The mattress dipped under his weight and then my blindfold disappeared. I opened my eyes but it took my eyes a moment to get used to the brightness once more. Dante slid down my panties and pushed my knees up against my chest until I was completely exposed to him. My lips parted with desire, knowing what would come. He bent down and drew his tongue along my slit, once, twice.

"So fucking eager for my tongue." He regarded me over my pussy as his hand kneaded my ass cheek.

"Yes," I whispered, eager for him to continue, to feel his tongue inside of me. His blue eyes held mine as he slowly dragged his tongue back and forth over my folds, lightly playing around with them. I bit my lower lip to stifle any sound. Dante pulled back again, and his dominant eyes rested on my pussy. He squeezed my ass cheek and my

center clenched, and a new wave of arousal trickled out. Dante's breathing deepened, a dark smile curling his mouth because he saw.

"Remember, no sound and no coming until I allow it," he rasped, and then he pressed his mouth to my pussy and sucked my folds between his lips, lightly then harder, and I whimpered, shook and got even wetter.

I knew it would be easier not to come if I didn't watch but the sight of this powerful man between my thighs was the most erotic thing in the world and I couldn't deprive myself of it.

Dante released my folds. "Delicious," he murmured, and he spread my lips. Even I could see how swollen and red my clit was, desperate for release, for attention.

"No sound, no coming," Dante demanded.

I gave a sharp nod and with his eyes on me, he licked along my slit with the flat of his tongue then flicked the tip over my clit. And again. His warm, wet tongue. Firm, then soft. Over and over he repeated the same torturous motion, his eyes holding mine, watching my despair at wanting to come, at needing to come.

My fingers dug into my knees, my teeth into my lower lip. "Dante," I got out.

"No," he growled, and circled my opening with his tongue the way I loved it, and I began to shake, my orgasm wanting to burst forth.

Dante pulled back and sat up.

"Please!" I gasped.

He shook his head. “No, you were about to come. I didn’t allow you to.”

I glared but at the same time, I shuddered with a new wave of desire at his dominance. I began to lower my legs but Dante shook his head. “Stay like that, opened up for me and dripping.”

He stood and slowly got out of his clothes. It took considerable restraint not to rip them all away and pull him on top of me. He climbed on the bed and knelt beside my head, smiling darkly. Remembering the early days of our marriage when I’d worried that Dante would be a cold fish in bed almost made me laugh. He pushed a pillow below my head so I was on eye level with his erection. “You’re going to suck my cock now, and if you do good, I’ll lick you again and let you come.”

I nodded.

“Part your lips,” he ordered. I did without hesitation and he slid his cock in until he hit the back of my throat. Steadying my head, he began to thrust into me, fucking my mouth slowly. His control was slipping and as usual, it gave me a sense of triumph.

Dante

I watched my cock slam into Val’s perfect mouth. She swirled her tongue and hollowed her cheeks, increasing my

pleasure. I held her in place, as I fucked her mouth slowly, taking my time, wanting to draw this out. It wasn't a punishment. Val loved sucking my cock and she did it just the way I wanted it. I'd taught her every move and she was a quick learner.

My eyes slid down to her pussy. The sight of her parted pink lips, her swollen clit, glistening and ready, made my cock jerk. Val licked my pre-cum eagerly. "Good," I groaned as I slid slowly out of her. She knew her cue and began working only my tip, sucking it and licking it. This was the part she loved most and wetness pooled between her folds, waiting to be lapped up but that would have to wait.

Val held my gaze as she sucked my tip. She dipped her tongue in my slit then twirled it around.

"Enough," I ordered. She closed her mouth around my cock again and I began thrusting once more, but faster and harder than before and then I exploded in her mouth. "Swallow every last drop."

She did. Always, but again the command made her shudder with arousal.

Slowly, I pulled out. Val licked her lips. "And did I do good?" she asked in a challenging tone.

"Careful, or I might decide not to let you come at all," I warned. She pressed her lips together, her eyes full of need and lust. The sight was enough to let my dick stay half erect.

I climbed down the bed and knelt before her waiting pussy. My eyes took her in, her need for me. "Do you want

me to eat you until you come in my mouth?” I asked in a rough voice.

Val’s lips parted. “Yes, please.”

“Good,” I murmured. “But first we need to practice a bit more discipline. You won’t come for the next thirty seconds. You will count and when you reach thirty, I want you to give me your sweet release. Understood?”

That was something new. Something we hadn’t done yet. Her eyes flashed with desire. “Yes.”

I cupped her firm ass and bent over her. Her pussy clenched in anticipation and my own cock filled with more blood at the sight. “Start counting.”

“One,” she said. I hooked my thumbs in her petals and spread her for me. “Two.”

I took my first lick, over her opening, and “three” and “four” came out shaky and then I dove really in. This wouldn’t be easy for her. I suckled and nibbled at her sensitive folds, rubbed them with my thumbs, traced her throbbing opening. Val had trouble counting, every word a gasp, an exhale, a whimper as I lapped at her, enjoying her arousal more than anything else.

Val was so responsive, so playful and loved to try new things. At the count of twenty-nine, I closed my mouth over her folds and sucked hard. She cried out the thirty and opened wider for me, shaking and moaning as she was granted her release. I groaned against her as I slid my tongue into her. Her muscles clenched around me. I lapped at her, delirious from her taste. Val shuddered.

I pulled away then climbed up Val’s body, kissing her deeply, already growing hard again. Her fingers curled around my cock, stroking me, impatient to have me fuck her. It didn’t take long. I pushed Val’s hand away, lined myself up and plunged into her.

She gasped. I started pounding into her angrily. My hand clamped down on her wrists and pressed them into the cushions above her head. Her eyes flashed up to mine, her beautiful lips parted. I dug my fingers into her thigh and hooked it over my ass for deeper access.

I lost myself in Val, in my lust for her until everything else faded into the background, until all that mattered was Val’s slick pussy around my cock, our sweaty bodies pressing into each other, our mouths seeking contact.

With a violent shudder, my release overcame me. Val threw her head back with a hoarse cry, her muscles contracting around me as her orgasm followed mine. I kept pumping into her, my lips pressed to Val’s pulse point.

With a groan, I lowered myself on Val and stayed like that, smelling her familiar scent. My own muskier scent mingled with hers and gave me a sense of possessiveness.

Val stroked my back and kissed my temple. “Will you tell me what happened?”

I released a small breath and rolled off Val. She turned toward me and I pulled her against my body then stroked her sweaty hair away from her forehead. Val regarded me patiently, those stunning green eyes full of understanding. It

astounded me how she could trust in me, believe in me. “It’s Orazio, isn’t it?”

I nodded. “And Fabiano.”

Val lifted her head. “Fabiano?”

My anger rekindled, even if I wanted to remain in my after-sex bliss. “Orazio is now Underboss in Boston, and Fabiano is part of the Camorra.”

Val stared. Her disbelief reflected my own initial reaction until it had been replaced by a thirst for vengeance and harsh anger.

Val shook her head. “Why would Luca make Orazio Underboss? It’ll only cause him problems.” Then her lips twisted, realization settling in her eyes.

“Yeah, he taunts me.”

“And now you are going to retaliate.”

“I have to. The question is how. Especially now that Fabiano is part of the Camorra. I can’t attack both the Camorra and the Famiglia.”

Val lowered her chin to my chest. “Then attack the Camorra.”

“I can’t spare Orazio.”

She nodded slowly. “I know. Not after this. But Luca will expect something, don’t you think?”

“For sure. He knows I’ll be furious once I find out about Orazio. He’ll triple his safety measures, at least in New York, and Orazio will have high security as well.”

Val’s gaze became distant. “I wonder if he has a second child by now…” She trailed off.

I touched her cheek. “Don’t think about it. It’ll make things worse.”

“I can’t help it. Sometimes I can’t stop thinking about all we’ve lost, and I don’t just mean the dead. I never get to meet Aria’s children or Orazio’s, and Anna can’t see her godmother. It’s heartbreaking. And now Fabiano. God, what else can go wrong?” She paused but I could tell that she wasn’t done yet. “I bet Rocco wants to walk into Las Vegas with blazing guns to kill Fabiano.”

“Of course. He’s furious, but I can tell that there’s more.”

Val tilted her head the way she always did when she thought hard about something. “It’s strange that Fabiano joined the Camorra instead of the Famiglia.”

“Indeed. It suggests he didn’t have another choice. But why would he find himself in Camorra territory in the first place?”

Val gave me a look. She despised Rocco deeply. I wasn’t fond of him on a personal level either, but so far he’d been a valuable asset when it came to strategical decisions.

“You think Rocco is the reason why Fabiano went to Las Vegas. Why would Rocco do that? It makes him look bad. Considering that his daughters are already in the Famiglia, this will only worsen his reputation.”

“I know, but maybe he didn’t think Fabiano would survive.”

“You think he sent him away to die.”

Val shrugged. “Don’t tell me he isn’t capable of that kind of thing.”

“I’m not.” Rocco was certainly capable of the most depraved acts when he thought they were to his advantage. I ran my hands through Val’s hair. “What would you do in my stead?”

“Don’t you trust Rocco to advise you on this?”

“I trust you absolutely. You are the only person who can say that.”

Val’s eyes became tender. She kissed me but then her brows pulled together in thought. “Like I said, I wouldn’t attack the Famiglia right away. Except for a few smaller raids on labs or clubs near our borders perhaps, just to keep them on their toes. I’d focus on the Fabiano situation for now. Maybe send a team who captures him and brings him to Chicago so you can question him. That way you’ll find out what really went on.”

I smiled.

“What?” Val asked with a hint of embarrassment.

“You should be my Consigliere, not Rocco.”

“Yeah, right.”

“I mean it. You’d be the better choice. You are clever and your heart is in the right place.”

Val pressed a kiss to my chin. “My heart could be a problem when it comes to the bloody side of the business.”

I trailed my fingers down her spine. “But mine won’t. I’m capable of doing whatever’s necessary. But you are right. Maybe it’s a good thing that you aren’t part of the business.”

“I already help with the business. And the majority of your soldiers would go on a warpath if you made a woman,

your wife, Consigliere. That’s not going to work.”

“They’d have to accept my judgment.”

Val shook her head. “We don’t need another battlefield within the Outfit, no less. Not to mention that there’s still Rocco. Or have you made plans to get rid of him?”

“You’d like that.”

“I do.”

I chuckled. “Not as innocent.”

“He deserves death for everything he’s done.”

“But so do I, Val.”

She huffed.

“Right now, I don’t intend to remove Rocco. I’ll wait until Fabiano tells us exactly why he’s joined the Camorra before I decide what to do with Rocco.”

Val nodded, then yawned. It was past two and we both had to get up early.

I extinguished the lights and kissed Val goodnight.

For several moments, Val didn’t say anything before her softly whispered words penetrated the silence, “You really think I’d be a good Consigliere?”

I smiled against her hair. “Yes, I have no doubt.”



Sleep evaded me that night and so I got up at five A.M. and crept out of the bedroom with gym clothes. Val was still fast asleep. I changed into my running shorts and a T-shirt and

went into the small gym room beside my office. I tried to run at least six miles every morning. This morning I decided on eight miles in the hopes of quieting my restless mind and banishing the lingering tension in my body.

After a quick shower in the guest bathroom and a change into a business suit, I headed into my office. It wasn't even seven yet, but I had a busy day ahead of me. I needed to visit one of our weapons dealers and then head to the Trentino, one of our newest Underground casinos.

The photos of Fabiano still mocked me on my desk. I picked them up and shoved them into one of the drawers before I bent over the papers with our weapon orders.

A soft click made my head shoot up with narrowed eyes.

Anna hovered in the doorway, half hidden behind the door. Her hair was tousled and she was still in her white pajamas with a pink floral pattern. "Can I come in, Daddy?"

I put down the papers and pushed my chair back. "Of course, Anna. What is it?"

Something about her demeanor was off. She usually wasn't this demure around us, even if she was reserved when strangers were around. She closed the door and tiptoed closer, avoiding my eyes. I pulled her on my lap and she nestled her head against my throat, her fingers fumbling with my jacket.

"You can tell me anything, you know that, right?" I said quietly.

She gave a sharp nod. "If I do something bad, Daddy, something you don't like, will you kill me like Orazio?"

For a moment, my heart stopped beating. Grabbing her shoulders, I moved her so I could see her face. Her eyes held honest trepidation and it was the worst sight I could imagine. The shit with Orazio and Fabiano meant nothing in comparison to the fucking anguish I felt because my own daughter thought I might kill her if she displeased me. The mere idea…

I nudged up her chin. “Anna, no matter what you do, I’ll never hurt you. I’ll protect you with my life from any harm. You hear me?”

“Even if I become a traitor?”

“I won’t ever hurt you. Ever.”

She bit her lip. “Okay.”

“Who said something like that?” I asked, trying to keep my voice gentle.

“Leonas said you’d have to kill Orazio because he’s a traitor, and that you’d do the same with anyone else who betrayed you.”

I gritted my teeth. I kissed Anna’s forehead. “I love you more than anything, Anna.”

“I love you too, Daddy,” Anna said and snuggled against me once more. Despite my workload, I decided to spend some time with her. “How about we play a song together?”

“Really?” She sat up with wide eyes.

I rarely played the piano anymore. For one, I didn’t have time, and it had never been my passion, but playing with Anna held a special place in my heart.

She hopped off my lap and took my hand, practically dragging me toward the library. This was my daughter, not the scared girl from a few minutes ago.

Anna settled on the piano bench.

“Won’t you play the harp?”

She shook her head sharply. “I wanna play the piano with you.”

“All right.” I sat down beside her. “Let’s see. What song do you want to play?”

“Let it be!”

I chuckled. I searched her booklet for the song then opened it. Anna loved to listen to the Beatles and play their songs. She was an old soul in a young body. “Ready?”

She grinned up at me, her worry and fear forgotten. I’d do anything to keep it that way.

PART 2

Dante

I should have known Rocco would act. The moment I’d told him I wanted to capture Fabiano for questioning, he’d been tense.

Valentina had only just celebrated our eleventh anniversary when Giovanni showed up on my doorstep, looking completely flustered.

“What is it, Giovanni?” I asked as I crossed the lobby toward him. Gabby quickly moved back into the kitchen to give us privacy.

“One of Rocco’s men showed up in our outpost close to Kansas. He’s more dead than alive.”

Leonas hovered in the doorway to the living room, eyes wide and curious. I motioned for Giovanni to follow me into my office. I had a feeling this would be something I didn’t want to discuss in front of my son.

“One of the men Rocco sent to Vegas to capture Fabiano?”

Giovanni huffed. “Apparently, Rocco sent them over there with the clear orders to kill Fabiano and all the fucking Falcone brothers who were with him during one of those disgusting death fights.”

I stiffened. “That’s what he said?”

Giovanni grimaced. “He wrote it down. The Falcones let him live so he could deliver their message to us, to you that is. But they mauled his body pretty badly. Cut his tongue off and his goddamn ears. Broke pretty much every bone in his body he didn’t absolutely need and then delivered him on the doorstep of the outpost. The doctors aren’t sure he’s going to survive the inner bleeding.”

I turned my back on Giovanni, needing time to get control of myself. Rocco had gone against my direct orders.

We’d discussed our plan several times. Capture not kill, and only when Fabiano was alone. The Falcone brothers weren’t supposed to be targeted to prevent a war with the Camorra. “What did he write down?”

Giovanni’s steps rang out then he showed me a photo of a bloody piece of paper on his phone. “That’s what I got.”

I took his phone and read the scrawl.

Dante,

I didn’t take you as a man who plays dirty.

Your flyspeck of a territory didn’t mean a fuck to me.

Until today. Attacking my territory? Trying to kill my brothers?

Nice move.

I hope you’ve prepared for war because I’m going to bring it to your door.

Playing dirty is my specialty and I’ll show you how it’s done right.

I’ll make you bleed in ways you never thought possible.

This will be so much fun.

Remo Falcone

“He’s a madman,” Giovanni said. “Causing his wrath will bring us trouble. I assume Rocco did this without your knowledge or did you change tactics without telling me?”

I gave him a look. I would have never made such a stupid move. Remo didn’t play by any rules and he was

completely unreasonable. A madman like his father and even more deadly if rumors could be trusted.

“Rocco is a liability.”

“He is,” I agreed.

Giovanni regarded me calmly. “You’re going to remove him from his position?”

I smiled coldly. “Nobody but you and Pietro knew of the plan to capture Fabiano. I prefer it to stay this way.”

“Of course. My lips are sealed. And you know how Pietro is.”

Even if an attack on Las Vegas was pure madness, I’d rather my soldiers think I was behind the insane plane than have them know that my own fucking Consigliere went on his own vendetta.

“What are you going to do with Rocco? Kill him?”

“Not yet,” I said quietly. “Send Santino and Arturo out to capture him and bring him to our safehouse for interrogation.”

Giovanni paused. “What about his wife and the boys? How much are they supposed to know?”

“I doubt Maria will be sad to see him gone from her life. Don’t give her detailed information. This needs to stay within the inner circle.”

“You think he’d run if you called him in?”

I laughed bitterly. “Rocco is a master at self-preservation, and if he knows what’s good for him, he’ll run as far as his legs can carry him.”

Giovanni raised his phone to his ear. I moved to the window, shoving my hands into my pockets. I'd held onto Rocco for too long. In the past, many of his decisions had been very helpful but in recent years he'd become a liability like Giovanni had said. This would stop now.

I wouldn't kill him, however. Not yet. There was a reason why we had the safehouse with its cell-like, soundproof rooms. They were designed to keep people caged for a long time. Rocco wouldn't die for his crimes, he'd live as long as I deemed him of value, and I had a feeling that one day he might be.

I didn't want to consider peace with the Famiglia, but if all failed a non-aggression pact might be the way to go. Offering Scuderi as a peace offering to Luca would be an option then. I hoped it would never come to it. Yet, no matter how much I hated Luca and wanted him dead, he was a man with values, not many, but the ones he had were ironclad. He was a family man like myself. Remo Falcone and his twisted brothers were little more than blood-thirsty, out-of-control monsters. There would be no peace with them as long as I took a breath.

"Do you want me to join you?"

I'd forgotten that Giovanni was still in the room with me. How long had I been lost in my thoughts? "Yes."

"All right. Let me say hi to the kids and Val, and then we can head out."

I gave another terse nod, glad to be alone for a bit. Maybe I had been holding on to certain traditions for too

long. Luca had ditched many old structures when he'd taken over as Capo, had even made his brother Consigliere, instead of the man who was designated to have the position by tradition. He'd chosen absolute loyalty and gratefulness over family ties.

The Falcones too had killed many old Underbosses in their territories until only those remained who were as crazy as them and absolutely loyal.

The Outfit was based on continuity. Father always compared it to a clockwork. Every cog in the work had to mesh perfectly for the clock to run smoothly. I'd always considered continuity the only way to guarantee a smooth process. But a few of the old cogs were obviously broken and needed replacement. This would be a long process, a process that would be met with many dissenting voices, so I needed to be absolutely sure of the direction I wanted to take before I made anything official.

A knock sounded and the door opened. I didn't have to turn around to know it was Val. Her arms wrapped around me from behind, her cheek pressing against my shoulder blade. "Dad told me about the Rocco fiasco."

I covered her hand with mine. "You told me to get rid of him."

"I didn't think he'd defy you like that. I only didn't like him very much."

"I stand by my choice. I think now that I'll have to remove Rocco from his position you should become my Consigliere, Val."

Val froze. I turned around so she was looking up at me. “You don’t know how happy this makes me, but I don’t think this is the right moment yet. Things will get worse before they get better, I can feel it.”

I shook my head. “I’ll do my best to keep the backlash from Rocco’s blunder to a minimum. Trying to negotiate with the Falcones at this point is useless, however.”

“Why don’t you ask my father to step in as Consigliere for now? He’s loyal to this family, to the Outfit, and he keeps a level head. He never lost his mind, even when the thing with Orazio happened. He’s sixty, so it’s an age many soldiers consider respectable for a Consigliere.”

I cupped her head. “That’s something I considered, and maybe I’ll ask him to step in until the Outfit is ready for you.”

Val smiled. “One day they’ll be ready. You’re going to lead us into a modern future. The Outfit needs to adapt to survive.”

I glanced at my watch, wondering if Arturo and Santino had captured Rocco by now. “Can you take care of Maria and her boys today? They might be shaken.”

“Of course, I’ll ask Enzo to drive me and Leonas over there. Anna is over at Bibi’s for a sleepover anyway, so she’s taken care of.” I kissed Val, grateful for having her. Over the years she’d been the rock in my life. She was the one person I could trust in any situation.



When Giovanni and I arrived at the safehouse, Santino’s black 1969 Chevrolet Camaro was already parked in front of it. He’d gotten the car for his eighteenth birthday from Enzo and pimped it ever since. Arturo’s station wagon was right beside it.

“Arturo’s got a strange sense of humor driving an old hearse as your Enforcer,” Giovanni muttered as we headed toward the doors of the warehouse. We had a safe house in several cities where we kept captives for questioning or ransom requests.

“I fear it’s more for practicability than humoristic purposes.”

The vast entrance hall of the warehouse was mostly empty, except for a dining table, mismatched chairs, and a couch with a TV so the guards could entertain themselves. The screens on the desk were black because we didn’t have any captives in the cells at the moment. Rocco sat on a chair, looking flustered, while Arturo perched on a chair right in front of him with a look of a cat trying not to devour the mouse. Rocco wasn’t in his usual suit but in slacks and a pullover, so they’d found him at home.

Santino lounged on the sofa but straightened when we entered. His similarities to Enzo were distant, but unmistakable. He walked up to me and shook my hand then Giovanni’s before he moved toward Rocco.

“What’s the meaning of this?” Rocco said with false bravado and pushed to his feet.

Santino shoved him back down into the chair. “You sit unless your Capo tells you otherwise.”

Arturo gave me a curt nod then focused on Rocco once more. Rocco pushed two fingers into his collar and tugged nervously then he looked at me. He didn’t quite meet my eyes. “Would you explain to me what’s going on?”

Giovanni snorted but Rocco’s eyes were on me.

A tight smile pulled at my mouth. “You really don’t know?” I moved toward him, noticing the fine sheen of sweat on his forehead despite the cold in the building.

Rocco’s eyes flitted to Santino who towered behind him then to Arturo who had barely blinked while he watched him. “Dante, this must be a misunderstanding.”

“Is it? So you didn’t tell your men to attack and kill Fabiano and the Falcones?”

Santino raised his dark brows. Arturo let out a small sound that might have been a laugh.

I stopped right in front of Rocco, forcing him to tilt his head back to look at me. “I gave you an order. It was clear and easy to understand. Capture Fabiano and bring him to me. And what did you do? You didn’t try to capture him. You tried to assassinate him.”

“I did what I thought was right,” he said, the hint of panic creeping into his voice. Maybe he was beginning to realize what this meant for him.

“You went against my orders! I told you to capture Fabiano, not start a shooting in Las Vegas.”

“It got out of control.”

“Don’t lie to me,” I growled. “You sent your men out to kill Fabiano because you wanted him dead. For God’s sake, Rocco, you attacked the Camorra. You shot at Remo Falcone and his brothers. That means open war with the Camorra!”

I had trouble controlling my rage but I wouldn’t lose it in front of my men. “I wonder why you were so eager to kill your son if not to prevent me from finding out whatever secret of yours he keeps.”

Rocco blanched. “We’re both good at keeping secrets, don’t you think? I’m not the only one who killed without his Capo’s orders.”

And I lost it. I clutched his throat, pressing my thumb into his Adam’s apple, making him choke. His eyes watered. I lowered my mouth to his ear. “You won’t say another word, or I’ll do with you what the Falcones did to your men. I’ll start with your tongue then move on to your ears. Arturo’s good at extracting eyes without killing the victim and Santino is very good at breaking bones, one after the other so the torture lasts as long as possible. But you know that, Rocco, don’t you? After all, you *were* my Consigliere.”

Rocco’s face flickered with fear. I released him and straightened, smoothing down my vest. “Take him into one of the rooms. I’ll need to chat with him.”

“Dante,” Rocco said pleadingly. “This is all a misunderstanding. I’ve always been loyal.”

“I think our understanding of loyal is very different, Rocco.”

Arturo pushed to his feet with an eager gleam in his eyes but I held up my hand.

“Let Santino handle this. I intend to keep Rocco alive for a long time until he can serve a better purpose than to become fish food.”

Arturo nodded but the disappointment was clear in his eyes.

Santino jerked Rocco to his feet and dragged him toward the underground cells. He was a tall boy—*man*, even taller than Enzo, and had no trouble keeping Rocco in check.

Giovanni sighed. “I’ll organize guards to do the shifts on Rocco. We can’t choose just anyone in case Rocco opens his big mouth.”

I gave a curt nod, then removed my jacket and thrust it over the sofa. Rolling up my sleeves, I moved toward the cell Santino had chosen for Rocco. Giovanni was close behind me.

Santino waited in front of the cell. “Do you want me to be present?”

“Wait outside for now. I’ll call you if I need you.”

Santino glanced at Rocco. “It must be strange dealing with someone you’ve known for so long.”

“It makes his betrayal all the worse,” I said only.

PART 3

Valentina

Anna and Sofia giggled as they rushed out of the bathroom in their blush-colored bridesmaid dresses. Every time I saw them together, I was surprised how similar they looked when one didn’t pay close attention. Anna’s hair was slightly darker than her cousin’s but they had the same eyes. The Cavallaro blue.

Dante, I and the kids had booked the suite right beside Ines and Pietro’s suite in the best hotel in Indianapolis, so the girls could spend time together. The suites were even connected by an adjoining door. Last night they’d watched movies together in bed until midnight, not willing to part from each other until absolutely necessary. I really wished those two lived closer.

I kept an eye on Sofia and Anna while Ines helped her daughter Serafina get ready for her wedding. I couldn’t wait to see her in her dress. She was gorgeous, an angelic appearance and would look magnificent in white.

I peered into the bedroom to see how far Leonas and Dante were. Leaning against the doorframe, I smiled as I

watched Dante help Leonas bind his tie. Leonas looked dapper in his grey three-piece suit, wingtip shoes, and carefully styled hair. The similarity was absolutely startling and got more prominent the older Leonas got. At only seven he was already his father's spitting image. Their personalities, on the other hand, weren't as similar. Leonas could be temperamental and rash at times, even if he was already good at keeping up a mask in public.

Dante glanced up, noticing me. His eyes took in my dress, a form-fitting dark green mermaid-style piece. I wore the emerald jewelry that Dante had gifted me over the years.

Leonas peered up as well. "Do I really have to wear this suit? The shirt scratches and the vest is too tight."

Dante touched his shoulder. "We have to convey a certain image in public. Not to mention that this is the biggest social event in a while."

"Weddings are boring," Leonas mumbled.

Anna stepped up beside me. "They aren't. You don't know what you're talking about. We get to dance all night!"

Sofia nodded enthusiastically, linking fingers with my daughter.

Leonas made a puking sound.

"Behave today," Dante said firmly.

Leonas nodded but he gave Anna a murderous look. She grinned.

Dante touched Leonas' head then came my way with an exasperated expression.

“No fighting in church today, you hear me?” I said sternly, glancing between Leonas and Anna.

“He always starts it,” Anna said.

“Liar.”

“I don’t care who starts it. I’ll end it,” Dante said, sounding stern.

Anna moved toward him and hugged his middle. “I’ll make sure Leonas behaves.”

Dante chuckled. “I’m not blind, Anna. I saw how you kicked your brother under the table during breakfast this morning.”

Anna flushed. Leonas jutted out his chin. “See. Liar, liar, pants on fire.”

Dante shook his head with a smile. Sometimes those two were like cat and mouse, and sometimes they were inseparable. Sofia pressed her palm over her mouth, stifling laughter.

“Sofia, are you ready?” Pietro called, coming into our suite in a tuxedo.

I glanced at my watch. “We really should go now if we want to be in church in time.”

I smiled at Pietro who looked stressed and even a bit nervous. “This will be a beautiful wedding. Serafina and Danilo are such a beautiful couple.”

“Yeah,” he said slowly. “But it’s not easy to let your daughter go. You’ll see what I mean once it’s time for you to marry Anna off, Dante.”

Dante’s mouth tightened as he regarded Anna who exchanged a conspiratorial smile with Sofia. Then both turned red. “It’ll be Sofia’s turn first. She’s older.”

“We’ll see,” Pietro said with a laugh.

“Come now, it’s getting late,” I urged.

Taking Leonas’ hand, I led him out of the room. Anna and Dante followed close behind. Together we took the elevator down to the valet parking. Sofia and Pietro would go to Serafina’s room and head out later.

“Mom, don’t hold my hand when we’re in public. I’m not a little boy anymore,” Leonas said quietly from his place on the backseat. Dante shot me an amused look as he steered the car away from the hotel.

“You’re only seven.”

“He thinks he’s a grownup,” Anna piped.

“You talk about boys with Sofia,” Leonas muttered.

“Stop spying on us!”

I squeezed Dante’s hand. “In the mood for a little bet? I say they don’t get through the wedding ceremony without a fight.”

“I only take bets I win.”

I rolled my eyes. “Of course. That’s why we own casinos. The bank always wins.”

“That’s right.” Dante smiled smugly.

The church was at the outskirts of town because the wedding location was in a renovated barn. Serafina had wished for an outdoor wedding and Danilo had agreed

despite his family's tradition for a more formal affair in a hotel ballroom.

Many guests had already gathered in front of the church. The moment we arrived, all attention was on us. We shook hands and greeted everyone until we finally filed into the church. Danilo was already inside near the altar, squatting in front of his eleven-year-old sister Emma who sat in a wheelchair since a car accident a year ago. The father of the boy she was supposed to marry, the Cincinnati Underboss, had canceled the marriage negotiations right afterward, which had led to a huge scandal and was why his family wasn't invited to the wedding.

"Can we go over to Emma? I want to say hi," Anna whispered. I touched her cheek, overcome by emotions at her consideration. Dante and Leonas were talking to the Underboss of Detroit so I indicated to them that we'd go ahead. Dante gave me a small nod. I took Anna's hand then paused. "Or are you too old for hand holding?"

She rolled her eyes. "I'm okay."

I laughed and led her to the front. Danilo straightened the moment he saw us heading their way.

I shook his hand. He was a tall, handsome man with brown hair and eyes. Serafina with her fair beauty would complement him well. "Hello Danilo, I hope you're not too nervous?"

"I've waited for this day for a long time," he said politely.

Anna hugged Emma carefully. Emma too was dressed in a bridesmaid dress, her brown curls arranged beautifully on

her shoulders.

“You look pretty,” Emma said.

“You too.”

Emma blushed and looked down at her lap in obvious embarrassment. My heart ached for her. In our world girls were judged by their beauty and by their capability to bear children. As a disabled girl, she’d be regarded as less because she was considered as lacking in both areas, which was complete and utter nonsense. Yet, despite her father’s efforts, she wasn’t promised to someone yet. I still couldn’t believe how disgusting the Cincinnati Underboss had reacted to the accident.

Danilo’s expression was full of protectiveness as he regarded Emma and Anna.

I bent down to Emma. “Your brother is a handsome fella.” She smiled shyly up at me then peered up over my head at Danilo.

Straightening, I turned back to Danilo. Anna told Emma about her visit in the Indiana State museum. She always insisted on going to museums when we visited a city, much to Leonas’ chagrin. Emma actually seemed interested.

“Your sister is going to miss you once you move out,” I said quietly.

Danilo frowned. “I moved out a few months ago, but Emma is going to live with me as soon as Serafina has settled into the mansion.”

“Oh,” I said surprised then glanced toward Danilo’s parents. His father had been battling stomach cancer for a

while now. He didn’t look good. Too thin and pale, and much older than late forties. “Because your mother needs to take care of your father and doesn’t have enough time for Emma?”

Danilo didn’t say anything, his expression polite but making it obvious that he wouldn’t discuss his family with me.

I smiled then glanced at my watch. “I think we need to take our seats. It’s not long now.”

Danilo gave me a quick smile then pushed Emma over to his parents. Anna and I took our seats in the first row as well. A few minutes later, Sofia, Ines, and Pietro joined us. Even though it was tradition for the father to lead the bride to the altar, Samuel would do it. He and Serafina were close as could be expected for twins.

Danilo took his place in front of the altar, looking perfectly composed. Tall, dark, and handsome, many girls admired him. I bent down to Anna. “He’s got many fans among the ladies.”

Anna bit her lip, her eyes twinkling. “I know.”

I didn’t get the chance to ask what she meant because Pietro stood abruptly, his phone pressed to his ear and a look of utter shock on his face.

“Pietro?” Dante asked, standing as well.

“Someone attacked the bridal car and is trying to kidnap Serafina.”

Dante

A hush fell over the crowd, their attention shifting from Pietro to me. I gripped Pietro's shoulders.

"Where are they?"

"About two miles from here."

I pulled my gun and my men followed my example. I ordered half of the men to stay here and protect the women and children, while the rest of the men and I headed out. Before I left, I kissed Val harshly, then motioned at Enzo and Taft to stay close to her and our children.

I ran out of the church, followed closely by Danilo and Pietro. Danilo was barking orders at his men. He'd learned to carry the weight of responsibility early and he wore it well.

His eyes were wild with determination before he jumped into his car and led the way. Pietro and I chased him, followed by even more cars. Who was behind the attack? The Bratva? Luca?

Soon smoke rising up from a black car caught my eye. We pulled up beside it. Pietro and I jumped out of the car. A body lay on the ground in a puddle of blood and beside it crouched Samuel, clutching a hand over his bleeding side. Pietro rushed toward him, not even paying attention to our surroundings. Raising my gun, I scanned the area but didn't spot anyone. I joined them, squatting on the ground beside them. Serafina's bodyguard was dead. Two shots had blasted through his stomach.

“What happened? Where are they?” Danilo growled.

Samuel’s gaze flickered with terror. “It’s the Camorra. They want Fina.”

“Fuck!” Danilo snarled.

Samuel stumbled to his feet, pointing into the woods. “They ran that way. Let’s go!”

Danilo ran off and I followed.

“Fina!” Samuel shouted. I glanced over my shoulder. Pietro was close behind but Samuel had trouble keeping up with us due to his wound.

Serafina’s scream rang out off to the right. We sped up. More men joined us, fanning out. Twigs snatched at our suits. The terrain was uneven and made running difficult, particularly dressed as we were. Serafina’s attackers probably had dressed more sensible for a chase.

“Serafina?” I called.

“Fina?” Pietro’s voice was shaky.

We ran for a long time, but Serafina didn’t call out again. I wasn’t sure if we hadn’t run in circles. Orientation in the woods was close to impossible.

“They are gone,” I said quietly when we stopped to catch our breath.

Pietro supported Samuel who could barely stand by now, looking ashen. His shirt and trousers were covered in blood.

Danilo shook his head, his white shirt plastered to his body from sweat. “Search the fucking city!” he roared at his soldiers. His men rushed off, back to the street and their cars.

“Call your doctor and tell him to come to the church,” I told Danilo.

He nodded. “I’m heading out now. I know this city, every corner, every nook. I’m going to find them.”

“Do that.” He stormed off. Pietro helped Samuel back to the street, while I gave orders to the Underbosses and Captains who’d joined us on the chase. They needed to give our contacts in the surrounding areas, at airports and close to the Camorra border a heads-up so they kept their eyes open.

Samuel sagged into the backseat. I bent over him and pulled his hand away to check his wound. “The bullet has gone straight through.”

Samuel grasped my arm, leaving bloody handprints all over. “Remo and Fabiano, they attacked us. Their goal was Fina.” He shook. “Fuck, Dante, what do they want with her?”

“Let’s get you to a doctor, Samuel,” I said, trying to remain calm even as my thoughts were spinning out of control. Pietro sat beside his son on the back seat and I drove. Pietro looked completely shaken as he pressed down on Samuel’s wound. “Everything will be okay,” he repeated.

They both seemed in shock. I’d fought with them before. They kept a calm head even in the most dangerous situations, but this was different. Serafina was in the hands of the Camorra and we all knew what that meant.

I drove even faster, needing to get back to Val, Leonas, and Anna. I had to see them with my own eyes, needed to make sure they were safe and healthy.

Danilo’s doctor awaited us in front of church. Ten Made Men stood guard around the building, the rest of the guests were still inside. The moment Samuel was in good hands, I hurried into the church.

Val, Leonas, and Anna sat with Ines and Sofia still in the first row. Val’s worried gaze hit me and relief filled me seeing my family was okay. I wouldn’t let anything happen to them.

Ines jumped up from the pew and rushed toward me. She was barefoot and her makeup was smeared from crying. I caught her as she stumbled against me, her frantic eyes meeting mine. “What’s going on? Where are my children? Where’s Pietro?”

I wrapped an arm around her. “Ines, Pietro is all right. Samuel was shot.”

Her fingernails dug into my arm. “Where is he? What about Fina? Dante tell me!”

Val came up behind her but apparently she’d ordered the children to remain in the first row. Everyone in church was looking my way.

“Samuel will be fine. He’s been taking care of.” I paused, not sure how to say what needed to be said. For a moment I looked at Anna who watched me with wide, horrified eyes. I couldn’t imagine what the news would do to my sister. If Remo had Anna in his hands. My throat corded up just considering the option. “She got captured, Ines. But we sent out men to search the city for her, and I alerted every soldier to keep an eye out for her. We’ll find her.”

Ines stared up at me, her chest heaving. She shook her head. “Who’d kidnap my daughter? Why? She’s innocent!”

I feared that was exactly why Remo had chosen her. Fury slithered through my veins. He’d gone too far, and he’d pay for it.

Ines clutched me even harder. “Dante, tell me who!”

Her voice was shrill, more fearful than I’d ever heard her. Not even when she’d found out she was to marry Jacopo had she looked this terrified. “The Camorra.”

Ines stumbled back, her trembling hand pressing to her mouth. She would have sunk to her knees if Val hadn’t wrapped a steadying arm around her. “Shhh, Ines, we’ll find her.”

Ines looked at me with blame in her eyes and it cut me worse than I’d ever admit. “I need to see my son.”

“Ines—”

“Take me to my son,” she whispered harshly. Sighing, I motioned for one of my men to take her to Pietro and Samuel.

When she was gone, Val came toward me. If everyone hadn’t been watching, I would have clutched her to my chest, and I could tell from the look in Val’s eyes that she wanted to do the same.

“Are we safe here?” she asked in a shaky voice, her gaze finding our children who were peering our way. The terror in their face was something I’d never wanted to bear witness to.

“I doubt the Camorra will risk another attack, not now that we’re alerted,” I said in force calm. “But we’re going to evacuate everyone now.”

Franco Mancini came toward us, supporting his weight on a cane. He wasn’t much older than me but cancer had marked him. In the past, this would have made me relive my own pain of Carla’s suffering, and while I’d never forget her and what had happened, my worry over my family and my love for them was at the forefront of my mind now.

“Danilo called to inform me that Serafina was kidnapped by the Camorra. I assume we’ll have to postpone the wedding then.”

I gave a terse nod, trying not to linger on the thought that postponing might not be enough. The Falcones weren’t known for sparing anyone. If we didn’t catch Serafina soon…

“We need to evacuate everyone now, Franco. Tell your men to make sure everyone has enough guards to reach their hotels. If possible, they should head back home right away.”

Franco sighed. “This is the worst day in the history of the Outfit.”

He walked back to his wife and daughter, and I headed from man to man and gave them instructions on how to bring their families to safety. As Capo, I needed to show strength and remain calm, even if I didn’t feel it.

Val waited patiently with Sofia, Anna, and Leonas at the front while Taft and Enzo kept an eye on them with drawn guns.

When everything was organized, I headed to my family. Sofia and Anna huddled together, hugging each other, looking terrified. Anna jumped up and embraced my middle. I wrapped an arm around her shoulders and stroked her head. “Daddy, I’m so scared.”

Fierce protectiveness filled me. “You don’t have to be. You’re all safe.”

I hoped the sheer force of my determination would be enough to prove my words correct. Leonas stood and came toward us. He looked mostly confused but I could tell he was scared as well, only trying to hide it. He touched Anna’s shoulder. “Dad and I will protect you.”

Pride filled me. I pulled him against my other side and squeezed his arm. Val got up, her arm wrapped around Sofia who looked completely shaken. I kissed Anna’s and Leonas’ head then gently untangled myself and went over to my niece. I sank down on the pew to be at eye level with her. Tears ran down her cheeks, and her nose was red.

“Where are Fina and Sam? And Mom and Dad?”

“Your mom and dad take care of Samuel. He was hurt but he’s going to be fine.” I hesitated. How to tell an eleven-year-old that her sister had been kidnapped by the enemy that wasn’t any better than the worst monsters from her nightmares? Her eyes held mine hopefully and terrified at once. I touched her cheek. “We’re looking for Fina. Someone took her but we’re going to find her.”

Her face twisted and she covered her face with her palms, starting to sob. She sank against me, her face buried

in my neck. I lifted her in my arms as I stood. She was a petite girl, smaller than Anna. Her arms came around my neck, clutching tightly. “It’s okay, Sofia,” I murmured.

“Let’s get you to a safe place,” I said to Val.

Val made a brave face and wrapped her arms around Anna and Leonas.

“I’ll drive them. One of you drive a car in the front another in the back,” I ordered Taft and Enzo. I regretted not having more guards for my family. Once we were back home, I’d have to consider new options.

“Will do, boss,” Enzo said, and he and Taft jogged out of church. Drawing my gun, even though the outside was protected by my men, I stepped out with Sofia on my arm, and Val, Leonas, and Anna behind me. The parking lot was mostly deserted by now, as most guests had already vacated the place. As Capo, I couldn’t leave among the first even if I wanted to protect my family. I headed toward my bullet-proof Mercedes, glad that Indianapolis was close enough to Chicago to drive, so I had my car with me. I set Sofia down on the back seat but she clung to my neck, trembling. “It’s okay, Sofia. I’ll protect you. Once we’re back at the safehouse, I’ll let your parents know where we are so they can join us with Samuel.”

Anna slipped into the car and linked her fingers with Sofia. “I’m here.”

Sofia pulled back, sniffling. She had Ines’ eyes. Overcome by a new wave of protectiveness, I stroked her head again before I straightened and closed the door.

Leonas sat beside his sister, trying to make a brave face. I gave him a tight smile and he lifted his shoulders a bit more.

Val took my hand the moment I got behind the steering wheel. She was shaking, but held her head high, trying to appear calm.

I gave the coordinates of the safehouse into the GPS then gave Taft and Enzo a sign before I set out. We arrived thirty minutes later.

It was a house surrounded by high walls and a vast garden, designed to give home to people in need of protection, especially important visitors.

I didn't relax before we were inside. Val took care of the kids, leading them upstairs so they could change out of their clothes. The house always offered a wide array of clothing, for children, women, and men, so I was sure Val would find something fitting for herself and the kids.

I took off my jacket then lifted my phone, calling Giovanni. "Where are you?"

"In the hotel, picking up your and our luggage. We're going to take it to you."

"Good. Who else is in the hotel?"

"Most of the Underbosses and Captains have already left. They're trying to bring their families to safety."

"Can you tell someone to pick up Ines and Pietro's things? I don't want them in the hotel. They need to come to the safehouse as well."

"Of course. Do you want me to stay? Or should I return to Chicago?"

Giovanni had taken over as my Consigliere while Rocco remained locked in that cell. I had a feeling his life might be of value soon. Sighing, I sank down in an armchair. “I need someone to hold the forte in Chicago while I’m not there.”

“Then Livia and I’ll return today. We’ll just drop your suitcases off at the safehouse.”

I hung up then called Danilo. It took a while before he picked up. “Any leads?”

“They headed out of town on Interstate 70 then switched to smaller roads. We lost their trail around Terre Haute but I have sent out every available man. We have to stop them from leaving our territory.”

“They’ll try to take a private jet or helicopter because it’s safer and quicker than taking the road.”

“We can’t let them take her to their territory…” The despair in Danilo’s voice was palpable. This was supposed to be a day of celebration for Serafina and him, instead they experienced hell. Serafina… I couldn’t allow myself to consider what she might be going through at the hands of Remo, or I’d lose any objectivity.

“The Outfit is looking for them. I’ll head out to join you as soon as Samuel and Pietro get to the safehouse.”

Taft and Enzo came into the living room and I ended my call with Danilo.

“We checked the premises and turned on the surveillance cameras. But we should add more armed guards in the surrounding streets.”

“See who isn’t needed for the search for Serafina.”

“I could ask my son and a few of our men to come from Chicago. He’s the best.”

Pride rang in his voice and he had every reason to feel that way. Santino was one of my best soldiers.

I nodded distractedly. “They should hurry. We’ll stay for a couple more days at least, until things have calmed and we’ve found Serafina.”

“Do you think we’ll get her back quickly?” Taft asked.

I stood. “We have to. Now ask for reinforcement.”

They left and I stared out of the window, trying to consider my options. Remo was a monster. Unfortunately, he was a clever monster if rumors could be trusted. I’d never met him or his brothers, only his father. That man had been a narcissistic maniac who could be driven to rash decisions. I hoped Remo would be the same way.

Steps rang out. Tension shot through my body and I turned around, my gun drawn. Val froze. She was dressed in jeans and a simple T-shirt, a rare sight.

Now that she didn’t have to keep up appearances for the public or our children fear shone clearly in her eyes. I crossed the distance between us, cradling her face and kissing her. “You are safe. No matter the price, I’ll keep you safe.”

Val swallowed, her eyes swimming with tears. “I’m so scared for Serafina.”

I gave a terse nod. “Once Pietro and Samuel are here, we’ll head out to join the chase for Serafina.”

“Be careful,” Val pleaded.

“I’m not worried for myself. I can handle the situation.”

Val closed her eyes and pressed her forehead to my shoulder. “How are we going to protect our children in this world? War with the Camorra and the Famiglia…” She shuddered. “How can we all get out of it unscathed?”

I kissed the top of her head. “You and our children will, I swear.”

“You too. I need you to be safe too.”

I tightened my hold on her, not saying anything. My safety was irrelevant as long as my family remained untouched. I’d lay my life down if it protected them.

Valentina

This morning, Anna’s laughter had rung in my ears, now I had to watch my daughter curled up in the narrow bed in the safehouse, dressed in foreign pajamas. Her hair was still in her pretty wedding updo. She’d refused to let it down.

Tears burned my eyes. They had all day, and it became a harder struggle containing them with every passing moment. Taking a deep breath, I walked toward the bed and sank down on its edge. I touched Anna’s neck, feeling the pins in there.

Anna sobbed into her pillow, completely shaken. I wished she hadn’t been witness to the chaos, the panic and Ines’ and Sofia’s open sorrow, wished I could have protected

her from the harsh realities of mob life. I wanted to preserve her and Leonas' childhood for as long as possible. Now it had ended far too soon.

Anna turned her head slightly, peering up at me with terrified eyes. "Mommy…"

I leaned down and kissed Anna's temple, tasting her tears. Her anguish felt worse than my own. "Can I take your pins out? You can't sleep with your hair up like that."

It was such a meaningless thing to worry about.

Anna nodded then buried her face in the pillow once more. I began to remove one pin after the other until Anna's brown hair fanned out on her back. I raked my fingers through the curls, trying to calm myself as much as my daughter.

A creak made my head turn. Leonas stood in the doorway, dressed in too big sweatpants and a T-shirt, his hair standing on end. He looked a little lost. Sometimes he appeared older than his seven years, but today he was the little boy I wanted him to remain for as long as possible. "Is your dad home yet?" I asked.

Leonas shook his head and came inside hesitantly, his green eyes darting to his sobbing sister. He stopped at the end of the bed, watching Anna cry with a wary expression as if Anna's tears were something contagious.

I stroked her hair almost mechanically.

I held out my other hand to Leonas but he stayed where he was. He reminded me of Dante when it came to dealing

with emotions and his problems. He tried to solve them on his own.

It was way past midnight and considering that we'd been awake since sunrise we should have been tired but neither of us craved sleep.

"Can I play poker with Taft and Enzo? They told me I need to ask for permission."

"You sure you don't want to stay here?"

Leonas looked at Anna then at me and gave a jerky shake of his head. "I want to play poker."

"Okay, then do that." Everyone dealt differently with trauma. If distraction was Leonas' balm then I wouldn't stop him. He left quickly and I turned back to Anna then stretched out beside her. She lifted her head slightly to look at me. "Mommy, will they kidnap me as well?"

"No," I said fiercely. "No, they won't. You will always be safe. Always."

Anna nodded. "Is that why Daddy insists I am homeschooled?"

Dante and I had actually considered sending Anna to the same private school Leonas went to at the start of the new school year in a few weeks. It was meant as a surprise for her. Now I wasn't sure if we'd go through with it. I actually wished Leonas could be homeschooled as well, but Dante wouldn't budge on that. "Yes."

Anna bit her lip. "I feel so bad for Sofia. I'd be terrified if someone hurt Leonas." I touched her head.

"Will they hurt Serafina badly?"

For Anna ‘they’ were a general concept, some shapeless enemy who wanted to hurt us. She didn’t know it was the Camorra or what they stood for. She couldn’t imagine the horrors that might await Serafina at the hands of those monsters. How long would those fears remain shapeless concepts for my daughter?

Anna fell asleep eventually and I slipped out of her room. I didn’t want to sleep, worried about letting down my guards without Dante near. I crept down the corridor toward the bedroom where Ines and Sofia were. I knocked gently.

“Come in,” I heard Ines’ raspy voice.

I stepped inside. Sofia was huddled in a blanket on an armchair, staring blankly down at a book while Ines peered out of the window which gave her a view of the driveway.

Waiting for her husband and son to bring her daughter back to her.

The room oozed anguish. Sofia briefly glanced up but didn’t smile.

I stopped beside Ines, following her gaze toward the lit driveway. Several guards walked the perimeter with machine guns.

“I don’t think any form of torture can be worse than this,” she whispered. I regarded her profile. Even tear-stained, with messy hair and in jeans Ines carried the famous Cavallaro pride with ease. It was something I’d always admired. “It feels as if someone’s burning my heart. Just thinking of what Serafina is going through…” Her voice died and I could see her struggle to keep her composure.

She finally looked at me. “This war must end, Val. It must end now. Too many people have paid with their lives already and now it’s my daughter’s life on the line. I won’t stand back. Tell Dante to make a peace treaty with the Famiglia and the Camorra. Let there be peace before it’s too late. There’s enough money to be made for each famiglia.”

“After what Luca and Remo did, Dante won’t have peace with them. It’s a matter of pride.”

“Pride.” Ines leaned her forehead against the window. “We must give them what they want. We must save Fina. We must.”

“Ines—”

“Can you please leave?”

I took a step back. “Of course.” Sofia lowered her gaze to her book, avoiding my eyes. I turned and left the room. For a moment, I braced myself against the wall outside the room. With every act of violence on either side, peace was more unlikely.

I headed downstairs into the big communal space where several guards were playing poker with Leonas. It was a strange sight, my young son perching on his chair, with all the armed, muscled men around him. His expression was focused and determined as he scanned his cards. The men were drinking coffee or Coke, and Leonas, too, had a glass of the sugary concoction in front of him. I usually didn’t allow our children to drink it except for New Year’s or their birthday but today wasn’t the time for rules.

Enzo’s brown eyes slid to me and he got up. The rest of the men were about to do the same but I quickly raised my palm to stop them.

“Please continue. I can’t sleep. I didn’t mean to disturb you.”

“You aren’t,” Enzo said. He sank back down and gave the other men a sign to continue. “You can join us if you want.”

That earned him a few surprised looks from the other guards.

Leonas snorted. “Mom can’t play poker. She’s a woman.”

I cocked an eyebrow. “Excuse me?” I strode over to the table. “I’m a good poker player. I used to manage a Casino.”

The men exchanged amused glances as Leonas’ eyes widened. “You did?”

“Yes. Are you playing Texas Hold ’em?” It was the only form of poker I was good at.

“Yes, we are,” a young man right beside me said. It took me a second to recognize him as Enzo’s son. They had the same maroon hair and light brown eyes. Only his name wouldn’t come to my mind.

“Would you mind if I join you to show my son that a woman can play poker too?”

Chuckles sounded.

Enzo’s son pushed back his chair and stood, towering over me. “You can have my chair. I’m going to grab some food.” He was a handsome man in his early twentieth with dimples that probably got him plenty of attention from the

ladies. Dante had mentioned him before because he worked as a second Enforcer with Arturo. He was the moderate butcher from the two of them. Finally, his name clicked.

“Thank you, Santino.”

He inclined his head then turned and strode away. A look of pride lay in Enzo’s face. I sank down. “What are the limits?”

“Ten and twenty.”

I realized I didn’t have my wallet with me. In the confusion of the day, I wasn’t even sure where it was. “Someone will have to lend me some money.”

An older man across from me took out a wad of cash and gave me half of it. “I offer fair interest rates.”

I chuckled.

“I negotiated them with him,” Leonas said proudly.

I narrowed my eyes. “Hmm. Very well.” Considering that Leonas didn’t know percentage calculation yet, I doubted the rates were fair. “I’ll let Dante check the details of our arrangement later.”

The men bellowed.

“Let’s say we forget about the interest rates,” he said with a wink. Considering he was my father’s age, I knew it was the typical soldier humor, and I actually preferred it to the stiff reverence I often received.

Leonas beamed at me as we began to play. I could see that a weight had lifted off his shoulders. He was still young, younger than Anna and for him, it was easier to get past the seriousness of the situation.

I allowed myself to be distracted by the game and Leonas' eagerness to prove his worth.

My eyes prickled with tiredness when the front door opened in the early morning. I jumped to my feet and so did everyone else. Dante, Pietro, Danilo and Samuel stepped in, looking exhausted, ruffled and subdued. The rising sun illuminated their forlorn faces almost mockingly.

Leonas darted toward them and hugged Dante's middle. "Did you catch the bad guys?"

One look at Dante's face told me they hadn't. They didn't know where Serafina was. My heart clenched tightly considering what this would do to Ines.

"No, we didn't," Dante said quietly.

"But you will catch the bad guys soon?"

The bad guys. My eyes took in the four men in the lobby with their guns, jaded eyes, and scarred bodies. I wondered if little boys in the Camorra asked their dads the same question when they spoke about us? Would Luca's son ask his father that question when he talked about Dante? Bad was always a matter of perspective.

Yet, one thing was certain, the Falcones were the worst. Even in our world.

Danilo shook his head with a harsh expression and stalked past us toward the liquor cabinet, pouring himself a generous amount of a dark liquid. "Why the fuck are you gambling in a situation like this?" he snarled at the soldiers. The men lowered their heads.

Steps pounded upstairs. Ines followed by Sofia stormed down the staircase. Sofia didn’t stop and barreled straight into Pietro who hugged her tightly. Ines froze halfway down once she caught a look at the men’s expressions.

“No,” she whispered. “No.” She clutched the banister and slowly sank down. “No!”

Sofia lifted her head, looking at Ines then at Pietro and Samuel. Her young face fell. Samuel staggered toward his mother and pulled her to her feet. She clutched him desperately and sobbed.

The guards disappeared into other parts of the house to give us privacy and to escape Danilo’s open wrath.

My eyes met Dante’s but his expression was a mask of control. It must be bad if he acted like that.

Glass smashed.

I jumped then realized Danilo had flung his glass against the wall. He gripped the edge of the table tightly, rage burning on his face.

Dante cleared his throat but nothing penetrated Danilo’s fog of despair.

Pietro led Sofia upstairs while Samuel helped Ines. I approached Dante, touching his shoulder. He gave me a strained smile. It made me ache all over. “I’ll bring Leonas to bed and then check on Anna. Why don’t you go ahead and catch some sleep?”

I nodded, even though I didn’t feel tired in the slightest.

Dante headed up the stairs with Leonas.

I slanted a look at Danilo who was still bent over the table and considered going to him to offer him words of assurance but he appeared like a man who preferred to deal with his sorrow alone. He straightened and noticed me. “This isn’t the wedding night I imagined.” The words rang with despair and fury alike. He was a man fighting for composure. I wasn’t sure what to tell him and I had a feeling he didn’t want me to say anything. Suddenly, his expression smoothed. He strode toward me. “Tell Dante, I’ll head out to my family’s mansion. I’ll be back tomorrow morning to continue our search.”

He didn’t wait for my reply, just left, even leaving the door ajar. I closed it then leaned against it, trying to hold on to my composure. I pushed off the door and went upstairs. The hallway was dark except for the light squeezing out under the door to our bedroom. I opened it.

Dante sat on the edge of the bed, his arms propped up on his thighs, looking a little stunned and… guilty.

I stopped beside him and touched his shoulder. “This isn’t your fault.”

Dante shook his head, his mask slipping back into place. I hated that he felt the need to do so but it also told me that his inner turmoil was so strong that he wanted to protect me from it. “I’m Capo. This is my territory and it’s my duty to protect my people, my family. Serafina should have been safe.”

“Nobody could have foreseen this, not even you. It’s dishonorable to attack a wedding. Remo Falcone plays by his

own rules.”

“He’ll try to force me into his game,” Dante said quietly, but an undercurrent of fury swung in his voice.

“What do you think does he want with Serafina?” I asked.

He shook his head. “I’m not sure about his motives.”

He was lying and that was more of an answer than his actual words. Good God, the rumors of the Camorra sent a chill over every woman’s back. “You’ll save her in time.”

Dante pushed to his feet, his eyes almost wild. “Will I? In time for what? It could be too late as we speak. For all we know, Serafina’s defiled body has already been dropped off so we’ll find it. Do you even realize what kind of horrors Remo Falcone is capable of, Val?”

I stared, my heart beating in my throat.

He gripped my arms in a too hard grasp. His anger wasn’t directed at me but Good Lord, it hit me like a hurricane, leaving me disoriented and shaken. “I am a monster, but even I haven’t done half the depraved acts the Falcones are capable of. Remo revels in torture as if it was his fucking drug of choice. And his crazy brother is a psychopath in the true sense of the word. He doesn’t feel anything. He can cut you up and have a pleasant conversation with you while he does it. He could maul women and children without a spike in his fucking pulse rate. Serafina is at the mercy of men like that, Val.”

My lips parted for words of consolation that would have done nothing and so Dante didn’t allow them to pass. He

jerked me against him and kissed me brutally.

His kiss was harsh, angry and desperate at once.

I answered his kiss even if I wasn’t aroused. This wasn’t about lust. He tore at my jeans until they pooled at my feet with my panties, and I stumbled out of them.

He pushed me down on the bed and climbed on top of me, parting my legs. Two of his fingers slid into me, testing my readiness. His zipper hissed and then he filled me in a hard thrust. I arched up in discomfort. Dante blinked down at me, and his guilt blazed up in the dark fog of his anger. I crossed my legs over his lower back and pulled him down on me, raking my fingers over his back. I wanted to show him that this was okay.

His lips pressed down on mine again and he began to thrust into me, hard and fast, his moves fueled by his anguish, which seemed to cloak us both.

The pain was good, it was welcome.

This wasn’t the lustful pain I’d come to enjoy. This was pain, pure and simple, a drop of physical discomfort and an ocean of emotional hurt. My body fought against both but I surrendered until the tears I’d held back all day finally burst forth.

Dante stilled on top of me. He hadn’t come. I doubted he’d felt any pleasure. His face sank down against my throat and he shuddered as he began to soften inside of me. He didn’t cry, never had in all the time I’d known him. “What am I going to do?”

“You’re going to lead us out of this, Dante. I trust in you and no matter what you decide, I’ll be at your side. I’ll always be there.”

PART 4

Dante

I pinched the bridge of my nose as I listened to Danilo’s recount of today’s search efforts. We’d spent the night in the safehouse and would stay here for a couple of days—until we found Serafina or until we decided it made more sense to return to either Minneapolis or Chicago.

“I think we have to take into consideration that Serafina is already in Las Vegas or another city in Camorra territory. I doubt they’ll keep her close to our borders though.”

“Let’s obliterate their Kansas properties. Kill the fucking Underboss there and every of his Captains,” Danilo said fiercely. He was young. He was driven by wounded pride and the utter need to protect what was his. I understood him too well, but a brutal attack on one of Remo’s Underbosses would be too risky with Serafina in his hands.

“It’s too risky. Once we have Serafina back, we’ll have our revenge.”

Danilo straightened and began pacing the room.

Samuel sagged in his chair, looking exhausted and desperate but I could see the same hunger for attack in his eyes as I saw in Danilo’s. They weren’t that different.

Pietro was more restrained. His worry for his daughter wasn’t any less acute than theirs, but he knew how dangerous Remo was and that he wouldn’t give us Serafina back because we began killing his Underbosses. He’d send her to us, piece by piece.

Val appeared in the doorway to the kitchen. The children and the women had spent the day in the garden, waiting and worrying. “We can eat.”

Pietro and I got up. Samuel didn’t move and Danilo only shook his head and glared out of the window. “We have to do something.”

“Danilo,” I said imploringly. “If we attack driven by anger and fear, Remo will not only kill Serafina, but also many of our men.”

“I don’t care how many men die.”

“But you care about Serafina’s wellbeing.”

Danilo gave a tight nod then lowered his head and took a deep breath.

“Let’s eat and then try to discuss options. We need a pause.”

“I’m not hungry,” Samuel muttered.

Pietro touched his son’s shoulder. “You need to eat so you can heal. We need you strong.”

That convinced Samuel and he finally pushed to his feet, wincing and his hand clamping over his side.

The table in the big kitchen was set for our family. Ines looked up when we stepped in and the sorrow in her eyes lay itself on my shoulders like an additional weight.

I didn’t get the chance to sit down because my phone rang. I took it out, glancing at the unknown number and suddenly a foreboding feeling took hold of me. I raised the phone to my ear. “Cavallaro.”

“Dante, good to hear your voice.”

I had never heard Remo Falcone’s voice and yet I knew it was him. Every word dripped with confidence, arrogance, and mocking triumph. I could feel heat rise into my face as anger burst through me. My fingers around the phone tightened and I struggled to keep my strong emotional reaction from showing. It would only excite Remo and worry my family.

I crossed the room and left but of course steps followed me.

“Remo,” I said.

“Tell him I’m going to rip his fucking throat out!” Samuel roared.

Danilo caught up with me. “Where’s Serafina?”

“Let me talk to my daughter!” Ines cried.

“I would like a word with you, Capo to Capo. From one man who had his territory breached to another. Two men of

honor.”

I held up my hand to stop the others. Their cries and shouts would only give Remo what he craved and I would not allow that. “I’m a man of honor, Remo. I don’t know what you are, but honorable isn’t it.”

“Let’s agree to disagree on that.”

“Is Serafina alive?” I asked quietly after I’d brought a few steps between me and the others but they followed me. Ines froze and clutched Pietro’s arm. Pure, undiluted fear flashed in her eyes.

“I will break every fucking bone in your body!” Samuel shouted.

I made another shush motion but this was useless. Remo had gotten what he wanted. He’d bathe in his triumph for a while. “Is that her twin?” He didn’t even try to tone his gloating down.

My own fury burned so fiercely, I was surprised I hadn’t caught flames. “Is she alive?” Everyone looked at me. Their fear, their hope, their despair hit me like an avalanche I could hardly brave.

Remo chuckled. I would make him pay for this. One day I’d make him suffer tenfold. “What do you think?” he asked.

“She is, because alive she is worth more than dead.” Remo wouldn’t give up this game of cat and mouse any time soon. It was too much fun for someone like him.

“Indeed. I don’t have to tell you that I will kill her in the most painful way I can think of if a single Outfit soldier

breaches my territory to save her, and I can be very creative when it comes to inflicting pain."

Relief filled me knowing that Serafina was still alive, could still be saved. But I'd heard what Remo and his brother Nino had done to their enemies and could only hope that they wouldn't show that side to Serafina. Not because they felt pity but because they wanted to dangle her fate over my head. "I want to speak to her."

Ines sagged with relief, realizing what that meant. She clutched Pietro who let out a visible sigh. Danilo closed his eyes, releasing a deep breath. Samuel hovered close to me, his hand pressed to his side, which had started bleeding again.

"Not yet."

"Remo, you crossed a line, and you will pay for it."

"Oh, I'm sure you think so."

"What do you want?" I'd attacked his territory. From what I knew from Remo and how he'd conquered the West and won back his birthright to rule over the Camorra, he wouldn't be placated easily. Remo saw himself as the undisputed ruler of the West. Everyone who doubted his rulership was removed in the most brutal way possible. That my men had dared to attack him and his brothers was something he'd never forget or forgive, and he'd make me pay thoroughly for it. I doubted he'd name a price in exchange for Serafina I'd ever be willing to pay.

"It's not time for that kind of conversation yet, Dante. I don't think you are quite ready for it. Tomorrow morning, we

will have another date. Set up a camera. I want you, her brother, father, and fiancé in a room in front of that camera. Nino will give you instructions how to set everything up. I will set up a camera myself so we can see and hear each other."

"Remo—" I growled but then a click sounded. Remo had ended the call. I resisted the urge to smash the phone. I had more control than that, even if it was slipping with every passing moment. Slowly, I put my phone back into my pocket, weighing the words I'd say.

Danilo smiled bitterly. "He's toying with us, isn't he?"

I gave a terse nod. "He's trying at least."

Samuel stepped up to me. "What about Fina? Do you know anything?"

"She's alive," I said. "Tomorrow morning, he wants to establish a video connection."

Ines frowned, glancing between Pietro and me. "What does that mean? Will he allow us to talk to Fina?"

Val pressed a palm to her chest and swallowed hard, realizing what Ines was incapable of seeing.

Danilo shook his head. "He's going to make us watch?" He sank down on an armchair and propped his elbows up on his knees. "The fucker is going to make us watch when he tortures or… or… fuck!"

Samuel nodded toward the doorway where Anna, Leonas, and Sofia were poking their heads in, eyes wide, lips parted.

Danilo shoved to his feet and stalked out of the room, past the children who gawked at him. A few seconds later the front door slammed shut and the engine of his Mercedes roared to life.

Ines stumbled toward me. “Dante, do you really think they’re going to hurt my girl in front of a camera and make us watch?” She peered up at me, hoping I’d deny it, begging me to do it, and I wanted to do it, needed to do it and so I lied. “Danilo is overwhelmed. We don’t know what Remo wants to achieve with this call. Maybe he’ll let us talk to Fina to prove she’s well so he can start making demands.”

Ines nodded. She needed to believe this.

“Mom?” Sofia whispered and slowly came in. Pietro stared down at his clenched hands and Samuel had gone to the window and was clutching the frame.

Ines turned to Sofia and hugged her tightly, whispering words of assurance to her. Val approached me and squeezed my arm then kissed my cheek, whispering. “This was the right thing to say.”

Lies had a way of getting out and in this case, they would undoubtedly do so tomorrow.

Ines led Sofia back into the kitchen.

“Can you take Leonas and Anna back to the kitchen as well? I need to have a word with Pietro and Samuel.”

Val nodded then she turned around and gently ushered our children out. Leonas threw me a curious look while Anna pressed up to Val.

When it was only Samuel, Pietro and me, I let out a sigh.

Pietro cast his gaze up. His eyes were tortured. “You know what a video chat means, Dante. You know it.”

I did. Remo was going to hurt Serafina for us to see. It was the beginning of our torture, the next step in his game. “We can’t allow the women to watch it.”

Pietro nodded. “Ines will insist, but I’ll put my foot down. She mustn’t see this.” He sank down on the couch, closing his eyes. “Fuck, I don’t want to see it. I…” He put his face into his palms, taking a shuddering breath. “If he… if he…”

I walked over to him and touched his shoulder. “We’ll find her. That video is our chance to gather hints. The more we gather, the better for us.” It wasn’t any kind of consolation but I couldn’t allow my own despair to surface. My family needed my guidance and I would give it to them.



Ines had insisted she watch with us, but neither Pietro nor I had given in. It wouldn’t do any good.

Danilo, Pietro, Samuel, and I gathered in the conference room of the safehouse in front of a camera and screen. Of course, Remo wanted to see us as well. He wanted a taste of our pain. He’d relish in it.

“Try to remain calm,” I urged again shortly before the designated video time. “Remo will only get further ammunition against us if he sees how much this bothers us.”

Samuel glowered. “Bothers us? He kidnapped my sister! He’s going to torture her. And you think I can stay calm?”

Danilo gritted his teeth. His thoughts probably followed a similar trail but he’d learned to think strategically since becoming an Underboss. Losing our heads in this situation would be the worst thing we could do.

I sought Pietro’s gaze. I’d known him almost all my life. Pietro had nerves of steel but right now his emotions were written all over his face. I couldn’t blame him. If Anna was in Remo’s hands… I shoved the thought aside. I could only hope that Remo was bluffing, that he wanted to have us at our breaking point but not willing to risk war. Because if he hurt Serafina, war would be the result.

“One minute,” I reminded them.

Santino lifted his thumb. He’d set up everything since he was the one who had the most technical knowledge. I gave a small nod.

Then the screen flickered and the camera glowed red, announcing that we were life now. Serafina appeared on screen, dressed in a thin silver nightgown, arms crossed over her chest. Her face was pale, her eyes swollen from crying. Good Lord.

Samuel took a step forward, his face a mask of horror. Pietro and Danilo remained frozen.

My fingers twitched, my teeth clenching in an effort to keep my outward calm even as my insides shook with a hatred so pure and raw, it was almost impossible to contain.

Remo stood beside Serafina but he smirked into the camera, not at her. I'd seen photos and videos of him, so I recognized him immediately. The scar along his brow and temple twitched as he smiled triumphantly. "I'm so glad you could make it," he drawled.

Danilo made the smallest sound, one hopefully only we could hear. His struggle was written all over his face.

Remo seemed to look straight at me for a moment, a challenge, an invitation for war. He wanted war, he'd get it. Then he faced Serafina who stiffened.

"Serafina, in Las Vegas women get a choice…"

"Don't you dare!" Samuel shouted, storming toward the camera as if it were Remo and he could throttle him with his bare hands.

I clamped a hand down on his forearm and jerked him to a stop. Samuel's eyes flashed to mine and for a moment he looked as if he considered hitting me. The anguish in his eyes reflected in my insides. I'd held Serafina when she was only a few days old. I'd seen her grow up. She didn't deserve this. Least of all the choice Las Vegas was famous for.

Even without seeing his face, I knew Remo was gloating. He knew exactly what this did to us. Even if he didn't care about anyone enough to feel the same anguish when they were tortured, he was well acquainted with human emotions.

Remo pulled a long, gleaming knife from his holster. I released Samuel who began to tremble. Pietro took a step closer, disbelieving, as if he wasn't sure if what he saw was

reality or his cruel imagination. This was a true nightmare that would certainly haunt us for a long time.

“They can pay for their sins with pain or pleasure.”

Danilo shook his head, murmuring, “No.”

Pain or pleasure. I’d kill Remo.

“You have no right to judge other people’s sins,” Serafina said in a shaking voice. She held her head high, tried to appear strong but her fear was obvious to me and it would be for Remo as well.

Remo moved behind her, towering a head over her with a smile I’d never forget. If I found a way to hurt him like this hurt us, I’d pay him back. Fuck, I wouldn’t stop until he was a shadow of the man he was now.

“What do you choose, Serafina? Will you surrender to torture or pay with your body?” He dragged his eyes down her body, lingering on her cleavage, undressing her with his leer for us to see.

Serafina didn’t say anything and her eyes flickered with terror. I glanced at Danilo. Dread settled in his eyes. Would he have to watch Remo rape Serafina? This choice Remo gave Serafina was a goddamn farce.

I wasn’t sure if I could bear seeing that. How were Samuel, Pietro, and Danilo going to survive?

“If you don’t choose, I will make the choice for you,” Remo said, his voice brimming with excitement as he barred Serafina from our view.

“I will choose the bite of cold steel over the touch of your unworthy hands any day, Remo Falcone.”

Surprised washed over me. Samuel’s eyes widened then he smiled slightly.

“I will enjoy your screams.”

“Remo, this is enough,” I snapped.

Remo jerked Serafina against him, her back flush to his chest, and grasped her chin, forcing her face up to his. I took a step closer to the screen, couldn’t stop myself.

Neither Remo nor Serafina looked at the camera. “Where would you like to feel my blade?” He showed Serafina the knife. “Or did you change your mind about your choice? Will you pay with your body after all?”

Serafina guided the knife to her forearm. I wasn’t sure what she was doing, what was going on between them. And then Remo cut Serafina’s arm. Blood welled up. She dug her teeth into her lower lip trying to keep her scream in. Remo gripped her waist, holding her up. I curled my hands to fists.

Pietro stumbled forward. “Enough! Stop it. Stop it now!”

Remo released Serafina and she fell to the ground, panting and dripping blood. Remo came closer and then the screen turned black.

Silence rang in the conference room.

Santino switched the camera and screen off then stood and slipped out of the room. Pietro sagged against the wall, his shaking fingers splayed over his mouth. Samuel stared at the black screen wide-eyed, chest heaving.

Danilo’s dark eyes met mine. “He won’t stop. He wants her. It was written all over his face. He wants her!”

I had seen it too. I wasn’t sure what exactly Remo wanted from Serafina. Maybe he didn’t know either. But he wanted to possess her. I knew because men like him and I and Danilo always wanted to possess what we shouldn’t. That look on his face it had been on mine when I fought against my desire for Valentina.



We decided to vacate the safehouse the next day. There was no sense in staying in Indianapolis. Because Danilo hadn’t married Serafina yet, Pietro as her father would officially lead her rescue and thus our operation base would be in Minneapolis.

Valentina and our children accepted it quietly when I told them we wouldn’t return to Chicago for now. The school year hadn’t started for Leonas yet, and Anna was being home-schooled anyway.

Ines took the news hard. For her, leaving Indianapolis marked defeat and as if she lost another part of Serafina. She broke down and refused to leave her bedroom.

Pietro and Samuel both were exhausted and shaken so I took it upon myself to talk to her.

When I entered her bedroom, I was reminded of the time I’d found her crying in the library.

Ines lay curled up on her bed, sobbing. Slowly, I approached her and perched on the bed. I touched her head

like I'd done when she was a young girl and Father had treated her badly. Her eyes opened so full of anguish my own heart squeezed tightly. She threw herself at me, and I hugged her. "My little girl is suffering. I can't bear it…I just can't. I wish I was in her stead. I'd brave pain for her, I'd brave anything for her."

I'd considered asking Remo to exchange Serafina for someone else, but Remo had targeted her on purpose for the shock value of having a bride, and maybe worse. He wouldn't release her. That look on his face had made it clear. He wasn't done playing yet, not with her, and definitely not with us.

"Ines, we must return to Minneapolis. It will do you good to be in your own home. We can't do more for Serafina here than from there."

"I feel like I'm giving her up."

"You aren't giving her up. We aren't. But we need to stay strong and you need to keep Sofia in mind. She's overwhelmed and being in her home will help her too. We all need stability. Val, the kids and I will stay with you for a while until we've saved Serafina. And we will save her. I swear."

It was an oath I wasn't sure I could keep.

PART 5

We moved into a safehouse in Minneapolis because Dante determined it was too risky to have us all under one roof at night. But we spent all day at Pietro's and Ines' mansion. We settled into a strange routine and the days began to blur.

Pietro had doubled his guards in and around the house. The atmosphere was tense and depressed. I tried to give Sofia, Anna, and Leonas a sense of normalcy despite the horrendous situation, but they knew what was going on. Not in every terrible detail but enough to be aware of the seriousness. Anna and Sofia definitely suffered. Anna woke every night from nightmares while Leonas dealt better with the situation. Maybe it was his age. Maybe he couldn't quite grasp what it meant to be in the Camorra's hands. Anna had a better understanding and she experienced Sofia's acute worry for Serafina.

We sat at the breakfast table one morning, almost done with eating and ready to drive to Pietro and Ines when Dante's phone rang. He always had the tone turned on nowadays and every time it rang everyone around froze, gripped by dread, fearing bad news.

Dante glanced at his phone resting on the table and the way his mouth set in a tight line told me it was one of the Falcones.

I got up. "Why don't you grab whatever you want to take with you today? We're heading out in fifteen minutes."

Neither Leonas nor Anna reacted to my words, their gazes fastened to their father. Slowly he looked up. My belly clenched.

“Upstairs, *now*,” he ordered.

Anna’s eyes widened. She pushed her chair back and stood then gripped Leonas’ hand who stared at his father with an open mouth. “Come, Leonas.”

He stood and Anna dragged him out of the kitchen.

I rounded the table. The look in Dante’s eyes scared me. “What is it?”

“Remo made his first demand,” he said in a deadly voice that told me he was fighting for control. He rose and peered down at me. “He wants Minneapolis.”

I huffed. “That’s ridiculous. You would never give him part of your territory, much less one of the most important cities!”

Dante smiled darkly. “Oh, he knows. He fucking knows.” He glared down at this phone. “He’s mocking me. He doesn’t want this game to be over now so he demands the impossible.”

I touched his shoulders. “Will you tell Pietro and Samuel?”

Dante looked into my eyes as if he hoped to find the answer to all his questions there. I wished I had them, wished I could help him. Everyone looked at him for answers, for actions, *for salvation*. It was a good thing his father was already crippled by dementia no matter how

cruel that made me sound. But that man would have only made things worse.

“I have to. Serafina is their responsibility before she’s mine. They deserve to know, even if it’ll complicate things for me.”

“You think Pietro and Samuel would agree to Remo’s demand?” I asked surprised.

Dante raked his fingers through my hair. “They’d do anything to save Serafina.” He smiled as if he understood them only too well. Naturally I would give Remo every last inch of Outfit territory if Anna’s or Leonas’ life was on the line. I’d give him anything, absolutely anything to protect my children. But men had been brought up to always consider the Outfit first. Duty and honor came before anything else. Losing your territory and with it your honor was the worst imaginable fate in our world. Yet, looking into Dante’s eyes, I wondered if he’d hand everything over to Remo if Anna was in his hands, and I was fairly sure he would ultimately.



Anna and Sofia went into the garden to sit on the swing while Leonas slinked about the house. For him, this was hard because he didn’t even have his friends to play. Anna had Sofia and they managed to distract each other on occasion. Leonas had to play alone most of the time.

Dante took Pietro and Samuel aside shortly after we arrived at the mansion and told them about Remo's demand while I sat on the patio with Ines, drinking coffee. She didn't know about Remo's text yet, and I wondered if I should tell her. Dante and Pietro kept many details from her for her protection, but imagining I were in her stead, I would have wanted to know every detail about my daughter's situation.

Ines glanced my way. I must have watched her for a while. "There's news that Dante doesn't want to share with me, isn't there?"

Anna and Sofia huddled close beside each other on the wide swing, talking. Girls were meant to be protected from all evil in our world, but often our world brought true evil down upon them. Bibiana had suffered in her first marriage and only now found happiness with Dario and her children. Serafina now suffered for the sins of men. "Remo made a ridiculous demand in exchange for Serafina's freedom. It's a fluke."

Ines set her coffee cup down on the table. "What did he want?"

"Pietro's territory."

Ines turned her head away, lost in thought for a moment. "He can have it."

I leaned over. "Ines, he knows Dante won't ever give him part of his territory. Handing over an important city to the enemy would endanger everyone."

"You mean it would endanger your children," she said fiercely.

I sat back, surprised by the venom in her voice and eyes.

Ines bit her lip. “I’m sorry. This was uncalled for. I—” She swallowed and pressed her hand over her eyes. “I feel so helpless. I always told my children I’d keep the monsters at bay. And here my daughter is in the hands of a monster and I’m sitting here having coffee, unable to help her, to protect her.”

Tears prickled in my eyes. “Nobody could have foreseen something like this.”

Ines smiled bitterly. “I don’t know. Things have been escalating more and more. There’s so much hatred between the famiglias. How will all of this end?”

Peace was even less an option after what Remo had done. Dante would rather make another peace treaty with Luca than ever agree to a truce with the Camorra.

“Do we even have any options? The Camorra and the Famiglia work together. They’re against us.”

I didn’t say anything. Things looked bad for us. Luca wouldn’t work with Dante, not after the photo incident and not when it meant having the Camorra as his enemy. Who else was there? The Corsican Union in Canada, but they kept to themselves. We didn’t share the same cultural or linguistic background. They didn’t trust us and had little to gain from a cooperation. They wouldn’t risk a conflict with the Camorra and the Famiglia. And the Bratva? The Pakhan in Chicago who ruled over most of the Bratva in the Midwest had some sort of non-aggression pact with Remo Falcone.

Ines let out a choked sound. “It’s even worse than I think, isn’t it?”

“No,” I said firmly. “The Outfit has gone through crisis before and we’ve always come out of it because we stood together. Remo is trying to drive a wedge between us, which is why he asked for Pietro’s city. He wants to sow dissent in our family, but we won’t let him. We won’t allow him to destroy our bond because Serafina will need a strong family when she returns.”

Ines smiled weakly. “Dante’s right. You’d be a great Consigliere.”

It was easy giving advice when you didn’t have to suffer the backlash. I could give Dante my opinion because ultimately he was the one who’d be judged for it. He had to carry the weight of responsibility.

Sensing that Ines wanted to be alone, I went in search of Leonas to tell him we’d have all dinner together. Danilo would be there as well. He’d decided to commute between Indianapolis and Minneapolis as often as possible. For someone as young as him, he had to carry plenty of responsibility. A sick father, a disabled sister, ruling over Indianapolis, and now saving his fiancée.

“Leonas!” I called.

“He’s with me,” Dante said from a room down the corridor I’d never paid much attention to. The moment I stepped inside, I froze. It was weaponry. That explained the barred windows and heavy door. Knives, machine guns, and pistols lined the shelves.

Dante sat on a chair and Leonas stood beside him. In front of them on the table was a gun. It was in its separate pieces and Dante showed Leonas how to put it back together. Then he explained how to unlock the safety, aim and shoot. Leonas listened with a look of utmost concentration. Dante handed the gun to our son and my heart stopped. He was only seven. He was too young for this.

“Dante—” My voice shook.

Dante looked up. “It’s not loaded.”

I swallowed. “Can I have a word with you?”

Dante held out his hand and Leonas handed the gun back to him with a proud smile. Dante ruffled his head then stood. “Now go to the dining room.”

Leonas rushed out, grinning as if this had been the most fun game. I closed the door for privacy.

“He’s too young,” I whispered harshly.

Dante loaded the gun calmly then put it into one of his holsters. He shook his head. “If the attack proved anything, then that no one is safe. Not even children. We can’t coddle Leonas. He needs to learn what’s necessary to survive in this world.”

“Why? You and your soldiers are here for his protection. Anna and I aren’t wielding guns either.” For which I was glad. I hated them, even if they were a necessary evil in our world. Yet, I didn’t want Anna to have to carry one, not even now. Even with a gun, she wouldn’t stand a chance against someone like Remo because she lacked what those men had: no scruples and cruelty.

“Because I need to prepare Leonas in case I ever don’t return to all of you.”

I took a step back. “Don’t plan your death, Dante. We’re trying to have a third baby and you’re considering dying? What am I supposed to do without you? And what about the Outfit? They’ll be thrown into chaos. Who’d lead them if not you?”

Dante came toward me and pulled me against him, but I didn’t soften. I was angry and scared. “Val, I don’t intend to die any time soon, but death lurks at every corner. I need to prepare Leonas so he could take over at a young age.” Seeing my horrified look, he kissed me gently. “Not now, not in five years, but I want him to be strong and ready to lead the Outfit once he comes of age.”

“Could you have led the Outfit at only eighteen?”

“Maybe. Not the same way I do now. I would have made mistakes but I would have learned from them. Hell, I’m still making mistakes, even age doesn’t protect you from error.”

I shook my head. “He’s just a boy.”

“He’s the future Capo of the Outfit. He can’t afford to be a little boy.”

I closed my eyes, pressing my forehead against Dante’s suit. “When… when will you induct him?”

Dante touched my head and pressed a kiss to my hair. “At twelve.”

I shuddered. “How will you prepare him? How will you make him strong?” I opened my eyes, searching Dante’s face. His blond brows pulled together. “He’ll learn to fight.

We have our fight centers for a reason. He'll fight with older boys who won't take pity on him. He'll learn to shoot. Eventually he'll have to be present at interrogations… at killings."

"You won't torture him to make him strong," I said firmly.

"I won't torture him."

I pulled Dante's head down to me and kissed him desperately.

Dante

Samuel and Pietro looked horrible. Dark shadows spread under their eyes. Pietro had started smoking again. A habit he'd abandoned for Ines.

I joined Pietro outside on the patio. He stared up at the sky, blowing smoke out. "When you first told me about Falcone's demand, I would have agreed without hesitation. I'm still not convinced I'd say no if I were face to face with him."

"He won't give her back to us even if we promise him Minneapolis. He knows it can't work. A territory can't be gifted. It has to be conquered with sheer brutality. He'd have to kill every Made Man in your city to really own it. Remo is someone who wants to conquer. He'd never accept a territory that he didn't bleed for. This is his game, Pietro."

Pietro took another deep pull from the cigarette then threw it to the ground and stepped on it. “I swore to Ines I’d never start smoking again. She didn’t even comment when I did. Seeing Ines suffer… fuck, this is torture.”



When I talked to Remo next time, my suspicions were confirmed. Despite his played disappointment over my refusal to answer to his demand, eagerness rang in his voice. He had more planned. He loved his audience’s reaction more than the game itself. Maybe he’d lose interest in his game and Serafina if we didn’t play the game by his rules, if we acted level headed.

We didn’t have many other options at this point.

Samuel approached me a couple of days after the call, and I could tell from his expression that he hadn’t accepted my decision like Danilo and Pietro had. “Can we talk?” he asked, an edge to his voice.

“Of course,” I said and followed him toward my make-shift office in a former guest bedroom. Now that I had to do most of my business from Minneapolis and not Chicago, I needed an office. I’d returned to Chicago only twice since Serafina’s kidnapping. Val, too, mainly stayed in Minneapolis with the kids to support Ines.

I closed the door and turned to Samuel.

His blond hair had grown, brushing his ears, and he hadn’t shaved in a couple of days, so a dark-blond stubble covered his chin and cheeks. Despite his lack of sleep and refusal to rest, his shot wound had healed surprisingly well.

“We need to attack Las Vegas. Every day that Serafina stays with that asshole, he destroys another part of her. We can’t just sit back and wait.” His tone set my teeth on edge but I cut him slack.

“Between Las Vegas and us wait many hundreds of Remo’s loyal followers, men willing to die for him. They’re between us and Serafina, and even if we reach Las Vegas without any of them finding out, which is unlikely considering we need an army to walk into Vegas, we’ll be in Remo’s terrain. He knows Las Vegas, and our informants tell us it’s close to impossible to get past the security measures of the Falcone mansion. That is, if Serafina is even still there. Dozens would die.”

“I don’t give a fuck. They can all die as long as I get Fina back,” Samuel snarled.

“But I can’t send my men into a death mission that’s bound to fail. They have families. They trust in me to make wise choices and not act out of emotionality.”

Samuel brought his face close to mine, his eyes burning with anger. “I bet you’d be the first to walk into Vegas with a fucking army if Anna was there and you wouldn’t give a flying fuck if every man died.”

I cared about Serafina and about Ines, Pietro, and Samuel, but I had to admit my love for my children and Val

was on another level, and I couldn’t deny that my reaction to Anna’s kidnapping would have been less restrained. If it would have saved her? I doubted it.

Samuel nodded as if I’d answered his question then he turned around and stalked away.

“Fuck!” I snarled, my control slipping. I wanted to walk into Vegas and rip Remo’s balls off and feed them to him. I wanted to show him that I could do every atrocity he had committed even if I usually chose less flashy forms of torture.

The Outfit was becoming more and more torn by the day, between the people who supported my cautious approach, wary of a war at another front, after all, we were surrounded by enemies. But there were also the others, many of them from the younger generation who screamed for blood, who wanted to walk into Vegas with blazing guns. Samuel was one of them, Danilo too, even if he wasn’t as vocal about it.



“When can we return to Chicago?” Leonas asked as we sat at the breakfast table a couple of days later.

Val gave him an understanding smile.

I’d considered sending Val and our children back to Chicago and staying in Minneapolis by myself. After all, their presence wasn’t required but I wanted them close. I needed

to know they were safe. “I don’t know,” I said. “But hopefully soon.”

Leonas pushed his food around on his plate. “I miss my friends.”

“How about we play basketball?”

There was a basketball hoop in the driveway. Leonas sometimes played with Rocco and Riccardo back at home and I had played for a while when I was a teenager. Leonas’ eyes widened with eagerness and he nodded.

Anna frowned then looked down at her plate. After breakfast, I took her aside. “Why don’t we take a look at the new online gallery of the Met?”

Anna grinned. She’d wanted to visit the Metropolitan Museum and the Museum of Modern Art for a while now but as they were both in New York that wasn’t an option. Luckily, both museums had good online presence. Anna hugged my middle, and I touched her head. “Thank you, Daddy.”

Val kissed my cheek. “I know you’re busy but I’m so glad you try to make time for them. This is a difficult time for them as well.”

“I know,” I said quietly. I wished my children didn’t have to witness so much of the stark brutality of mob life.

Pietro called me around midday. I’d already played with Leonas, showered, and managed to sit down with Anna for an hour. She was still pressed up to my side, staring down at the laptop when my phone rang.

“Pietro, any news?” I’d told him I’d meet him, Samuel and Danilo in the evening.

“Samuel and a few of our soldiers have set out to Vegas to save Fina,” he said.

Tension shot through my body. “What?”

The fury in my voice made Anna look up with wide eyes. I gave her a tight smile and gently untangled myself from her before I stood.

“I didn’t know. One of the soldiers, he asked informed me just now. I can’t reach him or any of the men with him.”

“Goddamnit, Pietro. That’s a suicide mission! They won’t return alive, much less with Serafina. Remo will be furious over this new infringement of his territory!”

Pietro didn’t say anything for almost a minute and I was trying to get a grip on my rising anger and worry. If Samuel got killed trying to save Fina and if she was killed by Remo to pay us back… Ines wouldn’t survive that.

“Fuck!” I growled, realizing too late how close Anna stood.

I tried not to curse in front of her but had failed repeatedly these last few weeks. I lowered my phone slightly. “Go find your mother. Tell her I need to head out to your uncle and aunt.”

“Okay,” Anna said hesitantly but didn’t move. I touched her cheek and gave her a strained smile.

Finally, she turned and left the living room in search of Val.

“Ines doesn’t know yet,” Pietro said quietly. “I didn’t tell anyone but you now.”

“Good. I’ll inform Danilo. He needs to come over ASAP.” Danilo had only left for Indianapolis yesterday but this new development required his presence.

“I’m coming over now. We need to consider what to do.”

Pietro made a small affirming noise. I hung up and closed my eyes. My God, Samuel. Remo would tear him apart piece by piece and record it for all of us to see. Maybe he’d even do it in a live video and force us all to watch or he’d kill Serafina as well.



We didn’t hear anything from Samuel or any of his companions nor could we reach them—until the next day, when a beaten but alive Samuel and a badly tortured and dead Outfit soldier were delivered to our outpost near Camorra territory.

I called Pietro the moment I got the news then headed over to their mansion. Danilo was already there when I arrived. He hadn’t bothered with a suit like he usually did when he met me. This time he was in casual chinos and a white shirt. He like Pietro looked as if they hadn’t slept at all. I had been in the safehouse until way past midnight and hardly slept two hours, so I knew I didn’t look any better.

Pietro stalked toward me the moment I was in the lobby. “He’s alive?”

“Yes, and not seriously injured. They beat him up. He suffered a broken wrist and a few broken ribs but apart from that he’s okay.”

Ines and Sofia hovered in the doorway to the living room. Relief settled on my sister’s face and she leaned against the doorframe as if her legs couldn’t carry her much longer. “What about Fina?”

I shook my head. “We don’t know anything. I didn’t talk to Samuel yet. He’s flying over with a private jet now. He should be here soon.”

Sofia hugged Ines tightly, crying softly.

Pietro released a deep breath.

“I’m surprised Remo let him live,” Danilo said with a deep frown. “I think we can all agree that it’s not an act of mercy. That bastard doesn’t do mercy.”

I had to agree. Samuel should have shared the same fate as the other Outfit soldiers. That he hadn’t could only mean Remo had something worse in mind. Something that would hit us just as hard or harder in the end.

I didn’t voice my thoughts because I feared it meant Serafina would suffer.

Danilo’s eyes conveyed he thought the same thing. He came closer to me, his voice low and insistent. “Remo’s going to be furious the Outfit breached his territory. He’s going to make us pay through Serafina. We must do something.”

“Another attack won’t save her. He’s now alerted, even more than he was before. If we try to free her, we sign her

death sentence."

"Maybe Samuel did already," Danilo growled.

Pietro's face was ashen as he listened. At least, Ines and Sofia were too far away to hear what Danilo had said.

"Let's go into my office," Pietro suggested.

Ines stepped in my way and touched my chest, her eyes swimming with worry. "What will you do with my son?"

It took me a moment to follow her train of thought then it hit me. Samuel had acted against my explicit order, had led several of my men into death. That was betrayal. Rocco was locked in our cell for that very reason, because he was worth more alive than dead, now more than ever. But Samuel didn't have any worth for me. At least not a strategic worth.

For the kind of betrayal he had committed there was only one punishment: death.

Danilo slanted me a curious look. As one of my Underbosses, he had to put trust in me that I didn't favor certain Made Men because of their status. I risked the distrust of all my men if I favored family.

Yet, Danilo was practically family too. Could I trust in him to keep the details of Samuel's behavior to himself? Or had he perhaps already told others?

Ines' hands trembled against my chest and her eyes begged me to be merciful. I'd killed for her, a man who was meant to become my Consigliere. I'd do it again. I'd never regretted my decision because Ines' happiness had been on the line, her life even.

And today I was faced with a similar choice. Only now I had to decide not to kill a soldier deserving of death for his betrayal.

“Dante—” Pietro began but I raised my palm to stop him. I respected him but this wasn’t between him and me.

I lowered my head and said quietly. “For you, Ines. Only for you.” I covered her hands briefly and she released a shuddering breath. She nodded and I stepped back.

Pietro touched her back briefly as we moved to the office.

Danilo’s face was perfectly neutral. He was difficult to read.

“I’ll talk to Samuel. I’ll make sure he never acts out of line again,” Pietro said as we settled on the plush armchairs in his office.

I tilted my head. “I appreciate it. But he’ll have to answer my questions first. I’ll make my point very clear to him.”

Pietro searched my eyes, then nodded.

He knew I had to make sure Samuel obeyed my commands in the future. I didn’t want to be faced with another choice like today again. I cared deeply for Samuel, and I wasn’t sure if I could go through with killing him. And giving a kill order to Arturo or Santino was out of the question. If anyone did it, it had to be me. I hoped it would never come to it.

We discussed possible reasons for Samuel’s release but in the end, they remained speculations, until Samuel shed

some light on the situation.

A while later, I got a call that Samuel was almost at the mansion.

Pietro hurried out to tell Ines but I stayed put to talk to Danilo. “You kept your thoughts regarding my decision about Samuel’s punishment carefully hidden.”

Danilo pushed his hands into his pockets and shrugged. “You are Capo. Your word is law.”

“It is, and yet I’d like to know your thoughts on the matter. You are Underboss and practically family.” I put an emphasis on the last word.

Danilo lowered his face. “Sometimes I’m not sure if it’ll still come to a bond between our families. Do you really believe we get Serafina back alive?” He glanced up, eyes tortured and angry.

“Yes. I think Remo’s plan is to send her back. If he wanted to torture and kill her, he could have done so right away. This is a mind game, and I think ultimately it’ll end in him sending her back to us in exchange for something.”

I realized he’d avoided answering my question once more. I stepped closer to him and squeezed his shoulder. “You are going to be family. This incident is a family matter and I expect it not to make the rounds.”

Understanding flickered in Danilo’s dark eyes. “Don’t worry. I can keep a secret if required.”

Rocco had said something similar to me many years ago. I hoped things with Danilo wouldn’t end in a similar manner.



I allowed Pietro, Sofia and Ines to have a few minutes for their family reunion after Samuel arrived. Bruises bloomed on his face and his eyes were bloodshot. His right arm was in a cast and his movements suggested his ribs made movement painful.

Danilo excused himself. He'd return for another meeting tomorrow morning. Then we'd know the details of Samuel's release.

I glanced at my watch. Val and the kids would come over for dinner but I wanted to get my conversation with Samuel over by then.

Samuel caught my gaze and resignation filled his blue eyes. Ines' eyes. My eyes.

I doubted I could kill him—ever.

Pietro clapped his shoulder lightly then Samuel headed for the office and I followed, knowing everyone was watching, waiting…

I was furious at him. Furious about his rash actions, but seeing him and the broken expression in his eyes, I realized that Samuel was already experiencing his own personal torture.

I closed the door of the office so we'd have privacy.

Samuel sank down in one of the armchairs and buried his face in his palms, letting out a shuddering breath.

I walked closer and regarded him for a moment. My nephew looked up.

“You went to Las Vegas behind my back.”

Samuel’s mouth twisted. “For nothing. Everything was for nothing.” He shook, closed his eyes. “I know I betrayed the Outfit, betrayed you by going behind your back. You should punish me for it.”

Yes, I should. I remembered when he’d taken his first steps. Carla and I had paid a visit to Ines at the time. Samuel was the first of the twins to discover the mansion on his legs but Serafina soon followed, always determined to be close to him.

I sank down on the sofa. “What happened?”

My voice was firm but free of anger, and I realized that was because surprisingly I hardly felt any. I would have tried to save Ines too. Samuel was young. He’d learn from his mistakes. It was painful but necessary.

Samuel swallowed. “We got overpowered. The Falcones, they are a unit. Nino and Remo…” His mouth pulled into a grimace. “They can’t be beaten in their territory…”

I gritted my teeth. It was something I’d told him before. “That’s why I didn’t agree to an attack. I knew it would fail.”

Samuel’s gaze became distant. “Yeah… but I thought I could save her.” He let out a tormented laugh. “Remo tortured Fina because of me. I heard her screams. Every time I close my eyes, I imagine what she went through… I… fuck, this is the worst.” His anguish was palpable. I remembered my turmoil when Ines was supposed to marry Jacopo, my

worry over her well-being. I'd risked everything to protect her, had killed a fellow Made Man, my designated Consigliere. Samuel had gone against my order, true, but his transgression was small in comparison to mine from the past. I put a hand on his shoulder and squeezed. His blue eyes were full of misery when he met my gaze. Samuel and Serafina were twins, they'd always been together. What Samuel must be feeling now, knowing that she was in the hands of our enemy, not to mention one as cruel and twisted as Remo Falcone, it would have driven most men to rash actions.

"I'm sorry, Dante. I accept any punishment you have in mind for me. I deserve torture… I deserve to die for this."

He shuddered under my hand.

"But please allow me to live until Fina is safe. I must know she's safe before I pay for my betrayal. That's all I ask of you."

I shook my head and Samuel's eyes turned down with resignation.

"I won't kill you, Sam. Not now and not when Fina's back home either."

"Because of Mom."

"Because of your mother and because I care about you. But don't go against my orders again."

"I won't," he said fiercely, but I knew that a promise like that was easily broken.

"And I won't torture you either. I think you're already experiencing the worst kind of torture."

“Yeah… knowing that Fina’s suffering because of my stupidity.” He fell silent.

I pulled my hand away and leaned back in the chair, feeling exhausted. “Remo’s playing with us. He wants to break us.”

“He’s succeeding, isn’t he?” Samuel rasped. “I feel fucking broken. Leaving Fina in his clutches feels as if I left my heart behind. I wished he’d exchanged me for her.”

“He knows he can break us better by keeping her.”

“Fuck, I don’t care about his fucking plans. I just want to save Fina, Dante. We have to save her. You didn’t hear her screams. You don’t understand. Just imagine if he had Anna…”

I couldn’t. The mere idea that someone might hurt my daughter, it made any logical thought impossible, and I needed to keep a clear head in this situation.

“Attack Las Vegas, Uncle. Ask every Underboss and Captain and every fucking soldier for help and stomp that shithole to the ground.”

“We wouldn’t succeed. Remo would know about our attack before we’d reach Vegas and he’d prepare for it. He’d hide Fina somewhere else or kill her to punish us.”

Samuel shook his head. “We can’t just wait for him to give her back. He’ll have broken her by then.”

“I’ll reach out to him and try to come to an understanding. And while I do, I’ll see if we have any options to get our hands on someone we can exchange for Fina.”

“Remo doesn’t care about anyone like we care about Fina. I doubt he even cares about his goddamn brothers. They are close because they know they’re stronger together. Like a pack. Those psychos aren’t capable of human emotion.”

I worried Samuel might be right, but Remo had his own demons. Remo had one thing he wanted more than anything else. “There’s still the option of exchanging Fina for Luca’s new Enforcer. Rumor has it Remo wants nothing more than to kill him.”

“Luca won’t hand him over to us.”

“No, he won’t. But if all fails, we can risk an attack on Luca’s territory and try to get our hands on the man.”

Samuel considered that and seemed mollified by this option. It was a last resort. I preferred a solution with Remo that didn’t force me to heave war with the Famiglia to another level.



Remo had lain low for a while now and it made me suspicious.

It made all of us suspicious.

“He’s up to something,” Danilo said. He hadn’t returned to Indianapolis yet. A sense of urgency had taken hold of all of us.

Samuel nodded but he'd been quiet and subdued these last few days. He was struggling. I knew how it felt to carry the weight of past decisions.

"Giovanni's trying to renew Rocco's contacts to the MCs in Luca's territory but it's difficult." If we wanted any chance of getting our hand on Growl, it had to be with the help of those erratic bikers.

"It's not really my father's scene," Val said. "He feels more comfortable talking to politicians than to bikers."

She and Ines were playing a board game with the children at the dining table while we men had settled on the sofas to discuss possible solutions. It was futile trying to keep everything from the children. After weeks of living in a state of emergency they had gotten used to it.

The bell rang.

Pietro frowned, glancing at his watch.

"I ordered clothes," Ines said. Pietro had told her not to go shopping for the time being. I too had asked Val to stay home as much as possible. Once we returned to Chicago and I'd established new safety measures, she could return to her usual routine.

Samuel rolled his eyes but pushed to his feet. The guards wouldn't have let anyone close to the door who hadn't passed their initial screening anyway.

"I want to ride on a bike!" Leonas exclaimed.

"It's too dangerous," Val said.

"I'm going to be a Capo. That's more dangerous!"

A smile tugged at my mouth despite the situation and Pietro even laughed. Danilo, as usual, looked stern. He was lost in his thoughts most of these days, probably imagining scenarios of Serafina's current situation. Splitting his attention between Indianapolis and Minneapolis was getting more difficult by the day. I avoided thoughts of what Serafina was going through at all costs. They didn't lead to anything but despair and rage. Neither was useful.

Samuel came into the living room, looking ashen. He held a parcel in his hands. "This was just delivered. A package from Remo Falcone." His voice shook and when he looked up from the parcel, terror shone in his eyes.

Ines let out a whimper, covering her mouth with her palm.

Danilo shoved to his feet and I, too, stood, only Pietro seemed frozen in his seat.

"Do you think he sent us a piece of Serafina?" Leonas asked. I stalked toward the table, grabbed his arm and jerked him to his feet. He winced. "Upstairs," I growled.

Leonas' eyes flashed with shock. I released him and he stormed upstairs.

"You too," Valentina said to Anna and Sofia who didn't hesitate.

"Open it," Ines whispered, pushing to her feet, throwing over her glass. She stormed toward Samuel as if she wanted to rip the parcel from him to see what was inside. I couldn't allow that. Not before I knew what was inside. Ines was a

strong woman, but some things were simply beyond what she could endure.

I slung my arm around her waist, stopping her. She struggled fiercely. “Let me go, Dante! Let me go!”

I didn’t.

“Ines, calm down,” I urged.

She glared. “Would you calm down if Anna was in Serafina’s stead? If there could be her finger or ear inside? Don’t you dare tell me to calm down ever again, you hear?”

Ines had always been a poised, calm woman. She’d never screamed at me. Pietro finally stumbled to his feet and came around the table, hugging Ines to his body. “Ines, let us—”

“No!” Ines hissed and ripped away from Pietro. She staggered toward Samuel, who didn’t try to fight her as she ripped the parcel out of his hands and tore it open. A white bedsheet fell out of the box. It spilled onto the ground in soft waves, revealing a bloodstain.

Ines made a choked sound. For a moment, we were all frozen. There was no mistaken what the blood meant.

Samuel bent down, picking up a piece of paper attached to the sheets and began to read in a low, trembling voice:

Dear Dante, Danilo, Pietro, and Samuel,

I’m sure you’ve all gathered in this challenging time to congregate. This allows me to present my gift to all of you. Sharing is caring, right?

I always thought the Famiglia's bloody sheets tradition was a ridiculous relict from the past, but I have to say I consider myself reformed. It has something very satisfying to present proof of your victory to your adversaries. You'll be happy to hear that I let Luca know how I borrowed his Famiglia's tradition to send you a very graphic message. He sends his regards.

In case your worry-riddled brains have trouble deciphering the sheets, let me spell it out to you. These beautiful virgin-snow-white sheets bore witness to Serafina's deflowering.

I have to say, Pietro, you raised a firecracker. She fought me tooth and nail to defend her honor. It made my claiming of your beautiful daughter all the more entertaining.

Samuel's voice died into a rasp. Ines sank to her knees, crying. Tears streamed down Val's face, her fingers trembling against her mouth, her horror-struck eyes on me.

Danilo stared at the sheets, his face frozen, his arms hanging slack beside him.

Pietro had his back turned to us, his shoulder shaking. My muscles had seized up in a state of shock and an anger so profound it threatened to tear down walls I'd built over decades.

Samuel continued reading, his voice broken and agonized.

I wonder what you feel now, Danilo, knowing that I took what was promised to you?

And you, Samuel, knowing that I defiled your twin? That she suffered cruelly because you dared to set foot in my territory. Lesson learned, I hope?

And what about you, Dante? What do you feel now that you've failed to protect one of your own because you were too prideful to admit defeat? I hope your pride is worth seeing the proof of how Serafina suffered at my hands, or should I say cock?

Maybe your pride isn't your downfall, but it sure as fuck is your family's downfall, Cold Fish.

Kind regards,

Remo

(P.S. once doesn't count, right? Maybe I can send you a second set of sheets.)

Danilo stormed toward the sheets and tore a lighter from his pants, trying to set them aflame. I grasped his arms but he struggled madly. He finally ripped free and stumbled away toward Pietro's office. Carla had occasionally talked about purgatory when we'd discussed her belief. I'd always considered the idea of hell ridiculous. But today I experienced my own personal purgatory, and I'd dragged my family into the flames with me.

PART 6

Valentina

Ines pushed to her feet. Her movements were jerky, almost as if she were drunk and unable to control her limbs. All she was drunk of was fear. She was shaking and crying as she rushed toward Dante. “Give him what he wants, Dante. Whatever he wants!”

“Ines,” he said with a strained note. I could see the anguish in his eyes. Dante had no trouble making the hard, the difficult decisions, but this was beyond anything he’d ever expected.

She fell to her knees, clinging to Dante’s calves. She peered up to him. “I beg you, Dante. I’m on my knees, please save my daughter, save Fina. Please.”

Pietro shook then he stumbled forward, grabbing her shoulders. “Ines, stop. Ines.” She fought him, clinging to Dante’s legs as if they offered salvation: Fina’s salvation.

I couldn’t breathe. The room was saturated with so much despair and fear it clogged my throat. I’d always worried war would reach our family, but never like this.

Dante was frozen as he stared down at his sister. “Ines,” he said quietly.

I pressed a hand over my mouth, trying not to cry. I could see myself in Ines’ place, could imagine her despair, her anguish. If Anna was in Remo’s hands… I, too, would beg anyone capable of saving her on my knees, would throw my pride out of the window and crawl if I must. But I wasn’t sure if Dante could save Fina, and he wasn’t sure either. Because Remo was playing a devilish game he enjoyed too much.

Samuel helped his father pull Ines to her feet and she fell into Pietro’s arms, clinging to him, sobbing. I’d never seen Ines like this, and the tears I’d tried to hold back, they flowed freely down my cheeks now.

Sound of glass shattering and furniture crashing to the ground reached us followed by Danilo’s roar full of fury, of despair and even guilt. Pietro and Samuel half carried Ines out of the room. Dante and I remained in the living room, many steps apart, frozen in place. A feeling of desperate helplessness hung between us.

Our eyes met. Dante’s face was a harsh mask, his eyes tumultuous. I wanted to say something reassuring to ease the weight of responsibility resting on his shoulders but my mind was blank.

My gaze found the sheets once more and I sucked in a quiet breath. I didn’t want to imagine what Serafina had gone through, how Remo had forced himself on her. Imagining her fear, her shame, her pain, pushed more tears out of my eyes. Dante strode toward the sheets, picked them

up and folded them neatly, then stuffed them back into the parcel. “What are you doing?” I asked tonelessly.

“I’m going to send them to a laboratory.”

“You think it might not be Serafina’s blood?”

Dante’s lips tightened. “No. But I need absolute certainty.”

Blood and DNA samples were taken from everyone in our circles to make identification in case of a brutal death easier. Even from Anna and Leonas samples had been taken right after their birth. I tried not to linger on the thought.

Dante picked up his phone and a minute later Enzo came into the mansion. He and many other men took turns guarding the mansion and the surrounding streets. Dante quietly explained to him what he should do and as usual Enzo listened calmly, his face not giving anything away. His calm was something I appreciated in a bodyguard.

He briefly glanced my way before he headed out with the parcel.

“I’m going to check on the kids,” I said. Even if I longed to be held by Dante, I could tell he needed a few moments to himself. He nodded, already turning his back to me.

I walked out. The house was eerily quiet now. Danilo had stopped raging behind the closed door of Pietro’s office and somehow the quiet bothered me more. I quickly moved upstairs. Muffled sobs came from down the corridor where Ines’ and Pietro’s bedroom was.

My heart clenched violently and I had to lean against the wall to compose myself before I dared to step into Sofia’s

room.

Anna and Sofia sat cross-legged on the bed, their faces confused and fearful. They looked at me for answers, and for a moment I knew how Dante felt when all of his men always turned to him for solutions.

My face felt stiff. I couldn’t smile, not even to console these girls. Leonas sat on the sofa in the corner, playing with his Gameboy and a deep frown on his face, blond strands covering most of his eyes.

I could tell he was upset even if he pretended to be engrossed in his game.

“Mom, what’s wrong?” Anna asked.

Sofia jumped off the bed and took a step closer. “Was there… was there a piece of Fina… in… in…” Her face twisted with horror.

I quickly shook my head, even if there had been a piece of Fina, albeit only blood, inside. I wouldn’t be the one to tell Sofia anything. If Pietro or Ines decided to let her know they’d have to tell her, but I doubted they would.

I walked over to them then sank down on the bed. Sofia’s room was a dream in pink with frills and stuffed animals. So young. So innocent. It was a little girl’s safe haven in our cruel world.

Anna pressed up to me and I kissed the top of her head.

Sofia looked toward her door. “I’m going to look for Sam.” I didn’t stop her. With everything going on she’d often been at the fringes, too young to be involved but too old to

require constant attention. I hoped for her sake as well that Fina would return soon.

“Let me talk to your brother for a moment, okay?” Leonas didn’t like to talk emotions in general, much less when others were around, even his sister.

Anna nodded. “Okay. I’ll grab something to eat.” I gave her a grateful smile. At almost eleven, she was already more responsible than I had been at her age. That was her father’s blood, no doubt.

Once she had left, I sat down on the plush sofa beside Leonas.

“Can you turn that off?”

He pressed the off button but didn’t look up from the screen.

“Is Dad angry with me?” he asked softly.

“He’s not angry with you. Maybe he was for a moment because of what you said. You need to think before you talk or you might hurt people, do you understand?”

He looked up, blond brows pulled together. “I guess.”

“Count to three before you say something that might upset others.”

“How do I know what upsets others?”

“Right now, if it’s something about Fina. Everyone’s really touchy.”

“Okay. Is she alive?”

I bit my lip. Seven years old and he asks me about death as if he was talking about what we’d have for dinner. “No, she’s okay.”

“I miss my friends. Anna’s got Sofia but I have no one.”

“You have me and Dad.”

Leonas made a face. “You aren’t as much fun as Rocco and Ricci.”

“Well, what would be fun?”

“Roller skating! Or riding the bike and doing stunts!”

Some of the stunts I’d caught the boys doing with their bikes had almost given me a heart attack. Not to mention that Dante would lose it if I left the house with Leonas to take a ride. “How about we do something else?”

He pouted, then his face lit up again. “The slime challenge.”

My brows rose. “Slime challenge?”

“Yes!” If it caused this much excitement for a boy of seven, it would be something I’d definitely not enjoy, especially if slime was involved, but I wanted to distract him. “All right, let’s do this slime challenge.”

Leonas’ answering grin banished some of the dark in my chest.

Dante

I sat in an armchair amidst the chaos Danilo had caused in Pietro’s office. Torn books, broken glass, overthrown shelves littered the floor. Danilo had left with his car. I doubted he

was on his way back to Indianapolis. He needed time to himself. We all did.

I stared down at my shiny wingtip shoes, at my perfectly ironed dress pants, the neatly closed cuffs at my wrists. From the outside, I was the immaculate, controlled businessman, the Ice Man. I was like one of those goddamn volcanoes hidden beneath a thick layer of eternal ice. Propping my elbows up on my thighs, I lowered my face into my palms. If one of those erupted, they had the potential to destroy everything around. I felt on the verge of a dangerous outbreak.

I wanted to destroy, only not the ones around me but they would be at risk if I gave up control. Luca and Remo, those were the ones who'd feel my rage. Remo for everything he'd done to Fina, to our family. And Luca, for cooperating with the Camorra despite everything he knew of them.

"Daddy?"

My head shot up. Anna hovered in the doorway. She was dressed in a flowery summer dress, her hair up in a messy ponytail and her blue eyes wide. She was everything I wanted to protect. I didn't say anything. Slowly she came inside, almost shyly. I wasn't sure what Val had told her, but I doubted she'd mentioned the sheets. Anna was too young for something like that, even if Val had already explained a few things to her.

"You look sad," she said quietly, stopping right beside me.

Sad wasn’t the right word to describe my emotions.

“I am,” I agreed anyway.

Anna wrapped her arms around my neck. I embraced her.

“It’s going to be all right. You are going to make everything okay. You always do.”

Her infallible trust in me was my incentive. I kissed her temple and held her for a while. I wasn’t sure who was comforting whom. It didn’t matter. Eventually, I pulled back. I had a call to make. “I’m sure Sofia can use some distraction. Why don’t you go find her?”

Anna nodded. She knew it was my cue that I needed to work.

She slipped out and closed the door.

Taking a deep breath to compose myself, I called Remo. I didn’t want to show him how the sheets had shaken us up.

“Dante?” he said in a tone that made me forget my resolution almost instantly.

“I got your message.”

“I know you don’t follow the Famiglia’s bloody sheets tradition, but I thought it was a nice touch.”

I’d always despised the tradition, had found it utterly distasteful when I’d been confronted with it at Famiglia weddings and even the occasional Outfit wedding of very traditional families who stuck to the old habits. But these sheets stood for something far worse than a consummated marriage. They stood for an act of violence a woman shouldn’t ever have to suffer, not in a marriage and not

outside of it either. “There are rules in our world. We don’t attack children and women.”

“Funny that you say that. When your soldiers attacked my territory, they fired at my thirteen-year-old brother. You broke those fucking rules first, so stop the bullshit.”

“You know as well as I do that I didn’t give the order to kill your brother, and he’s alive and well.”

“If he weren’t, we wouldn’t be having this conversation, Dante. I would have killed every fucking person you care about, and we both know there are so many to choose from.”

Anna, Leonas, Val… he wouldn’t get near them. I’d do anything to protect them, if necessary even stoop as low as him. “You have people you don’t want to lose either, Remo. Don’t forget that.”

Samuel didn’t believe Remo to care about anyone but the note of protectiveness when he’d mentioned his brothers led me to believe something else. It was a flicker of hope.

“I thought the sheets might have made you see reason, but I see that you want Serafina to suffer a bit more.”

“Remo—” The click sounded.

“Fuck,” I growled.

I tried calling Remo in the following days but he ignored my calls. Ines’ despair rose with every passing day, and so did Danilo’s, Samuel’s, and Pietro’s wish to go through with our attack on Luca’s Enforcer.

The MCs had agreed to give a kidnapping a try in return for outrageous amounts of money and numbers of guns and drugs. I didn’t trust them. They wanted to be paid in

advance because of the huge risk and I was wary of agreeing to such a deal.

I was glad when Remo finally contacted me with a new demand, one I had anticipated. My former Consigliere in exchange for my niece. Naturally, I agreed to give him Rocco. I didn't care about his fate or the undoubtedly cruel torture he'd suffer under Fabiano's and the Falcone's hands. That wasn't why I'd been reluctant to hand him over. No, it was regarded as weak to answer to the enemy's demand, especially if said enemy asked for your former Consigliere, *especially* if the enemy was Remo Falcone. An action like that caused worry among the ranks of my Underbosses and Captains because they preferred to consider themselves safe and giving up one of theirs burst their bubble. Rocco had many friends among my men. He knew how to manipulate people.

Exchanging a worthless girl against a former Consigliere would be seen critically by some. Others, who held their family dear, would judge me more kindly. It didn't matter. I'd made my decision. I had to save Serafina, for her sake and my family's sake.

PART 7

Dante

Val had baked a cake for Anna's eleventh birthday and held a small celebration that felt more like a funeral.

Every smile was fake, every laugh forced.

We tried our hand at pretend happiness. It tasted fake, bitter.

Anna blew out her eleven candles, her eyes closed tightly. I knew what her wish was even without her revealing it. She hoped things would go well tomorrow, that we'd all return with Serafina. It was my greatest wish as well. Many things hinged on the outcome of the exchange, most importantly the happiness of my family.

Samuel looked off into space, torn between hope and worry. Remo had agreed to an exchange tomorrow evening. Danilo, Pietro, and I would leave early in the morning to take Rocco to Las Vegas. Santino and Arturo had brought him to Minneapolis a few hours ago.

Anna smiled when she unpacked the painting utensils Val had gotten for her. We all ate cake afterward, trying to maintain meaningless conversation but it was impossible to overcome the tension.

I felt sorry for Anna. She always loved celebrating her birthday but today her special day had been ruined by the consequences of my choices. I promised myself that this would never happen again.

We all went to bed early but sleep didn’t come. Not for me, nor for Val. She clung to me in the dark, her body tight with anxiety. “I’m so scared that this is a trap. Going to Vegas is madness, you know it. Remo could plan to kill you all.”

“He could, but I doubt it. He’ll kill us later, after we’ve suffered for a while.”

“Suffered?”

“Under the weight of our guilt.”

“Do you feel guilty?”

“Yes. And seeing Serafina, we’ll all be reminded of how we failed her. Pietro, Samuel, Danilo and especially me.”

Val breathed out. “I can’t live without you, Dante. Don’t let rage consume you tomorrow. Don’t risk anything.”

My wrath for Remo was close to untamable. I wanted to see him on his knees, begging for mercy. Tomorrow wouldn’t be that day. But eventually…

I kissed Val and slipped my fingers between her smooth thighs, wanting to feel her warmth, wanting to feel alive. I didn’t want to talk, not about all the ways this could go wrong.

Our kiss was slow and my fingers were too. I wasn’t overcome with lust. I didn’t even want to come myself. I only needed to make Val feel good, needed to lose myself in her heat and moans.

She parted her legs for me and I stroked her lightly, occasionally dipping my fingers into her. It took a long time for her to loosen up, to allow pleasure. When she finally

came, I closed my eyes, my lips against her pulse-point. I gently pumped my fingers into her. “I love you, Val. I’ll protect you and our family until I die.”

“Not tomorrow,” she got out.

“Not tomorrow,” I promised.



Santino heaved Rocco into the helicopter. We’d travel most of the distance to Las Vegas like that, only the last part from an airport near Vegas to our meeting point with a rental car.

We barely spoke during our journey. We’d gone over everything in the morning. Every additional word would only increase our tension.

Danilo and I lifted Rocco out of the trunk of the car when we arrived at the designated meeting spot thirty minutes before the agreed time. I scanned our surroundings but couldn’t spot any snipers on the surrounding rooftops. Rocco’s desperate eyes caught mine and he struggled against his bindings, trying to speak despite the tape over his mouth. We dropped him on the ground then waited. Dry heat greeted us and sweat trickled down my back under the thick layers of my suit.

Danilo regarded Rocco with disgust but Rocco’s eyes were on me, still hoping I’d change my mind.

Pietro stopped beside me, a fine sheen of sweat on his forehead. It was much warmer in Vegas than it had been

back in Minneapolis. “Fuck. I’m fucking scared to see Fina…”

Danilo’s mouth tightened and he glanced down at the ground.

“She’ll be safe soon,” I said firmly.

“I hate to be exposed like this, without pulled guns no less,” Danilo said after a few minutes of silence.

I, too, had trouble making myself this vulnerable in enemy territory, but I didn’t think Remo would shoot at us. That wasn’t his endgame, not today.

A car approached then stopped about one hundred yards away. Movement up on one of the surrounding buildings caught my attention. A sniper pointed a gun at us.

Danilo’s hand darted toward his holster.

“No,” I clipped.

Danilo reluctantly pulled his hand back and lowered his gaze from the roof, then his eyes went wide.

I followed his gaze toward the car and my muscles tensed when Remo Falcone got out with Serafina. She was dressed in her ripped and bloody wedding dress. A moment later, Fabiano got out as well, a gun aimed at us.

Rocco made desperate sounds against his tape but I ignored him.

“Good god,” Pietro croaked.

“You were very ill-advised attacking our territory, Dante,” Remo drawled, pulling Serafina against his body.

Pietro rocked forward but I grasped his arm.

“Fuck. I’m going to skin the bastard. I’m going to fucking kill him for touching her,” Danilo growled.

“Don’t move,” I ordered. Remo probably waited for a show. That would give him additional satisfaction.

Serafina didn’t look our way. She stared at the ground, her shoulders hunched. She looked broken, and worse ashamed, when she had absolutely no reason to be. We were at fault, not her. When she finally raised her eyes and looked at Pietro, he sucked in a sharp breath. The anguish on his face and the look of hopelessness on hers, it broke through the cracks in my armor, but I battled my emotions.

Remo grinned. “Next time you consider fucking with us, look at your niece, Dante, and remember how you failed her.”

I had. I had failed them all. I’d done what I thought was best and I still couldn’t see what else I could have done after Remo had kidnapped Serafina. Before then, long before then I should have removed Rocco from his position.

Remo got intimately close to Serafina and even from afar I could see her shudder. I gritted my teeth, my grip on Pietro tightening so he didn’t storm forward. Danilo, too, was obviously fighting with himself.

When Remo finally moved back from Serafina, he nodded toward Rocco who lay behind us on the ground. “Hand over Scuderi.”

I turned and grabbed the rope wrapped around Rocco then dragged him toward Remo and Fabiano. The latter, I fixed with a hard look, wondering how he could have become the man he was today. He’d known Serafina when she was a little girl. They’d played together. He’d always

been a good boy. I shoved Rocco toward them. He was responsible for what Fabiano had become, and for Serafina's fate as well. I hoped they'd torture him the way they were famous for. "Release my niece, *now*."

Remo held my eyes for a moment, challenge in them. He was Benedetto's son through and through. The same eyes and insanity. His father had fallen deeply, and Remo, too, would fall and his kingdom would fall with him.

Remo pulled Serafina close once more and she cringed. I gritted my teeth so tightly, the sound vibrated in my head. Finally, Remo pushed Serafina away and she stumbled toward me, her eyes disoriented.

She was in shock. I quickly wrapped my arm around her and Pietro appeared on her other side, supporting her as well as we led her away. Danilo came toward us, reaching for Serafina and she cringed away from him.

Danilo stepped back, and I sent him a warning look because I could tell he wanted to storm toward Remo and pummel him to death. Our time would come. But now today, not with Serafina close by. Her safety was our top priority today.

Serafina trembled violently in our hold. I scanned her as we headed toward the car. She didn't have any obvious injuries, except for the bite marks at her neck. Fury and guilt battled a relentless battle in my chest seeing the marks of my niece's suffering. I'd have to ask for a female doc to check on possible rape injuries.

We got into the car. Pietro in the back with Serafina, and Danilo with me in the front. I hit the gas and pulled away, wanting to get out of Camorra territory as quickly as possible.

“You are safe now, Fina. Nothing will ever happen to you again. I’m sorry, dove. I’m so sorry,” Pietro rasped and then the sound of his rough crying could be heard.

My fingers around the steering wheel tightened. Danilo glanced out the window and closed his eyes. I kept throwing glances at my niece and Pietro through the rearview-mirror. Pietro was a strong Underboss, a man who’d been raised in a similar manner as I had been. I’d never seen him cry and I was sure I never would again after today. Getting Serafina back was meant to heal this family, but I had a feeling healing wouldn’t come easily, maybe not at all. Remo had left his mark, and not just on Serafina’s body.

Valentina

I hadn’t heard from Dante in hours. My nerves were frayed. What if he didn’t return to me?

Remo Falcone couldn’t be trusted. He was one of the worst monsters in our world. Dante was sure Remo wanted to continue his devious game of breaking us, but maybe he changed his mind and just ended everything today with a bullet to Dante’s head. It was Remo’s chance to kill three

high-ranking Outfit members at once, and it would throw the Outfit into utter darkness. He and Luca would attack and try to tear our territory apart. My eyes darted to Leonas who climbed the tree in the garden of the safehouse. Sofia and Anna sat on a blanket on the grass, talking. If the Outfit fell, what would happen to them? I'd protect them with everything I had, but where could I run to? Everyone knew my face and we were surrounded by enemies. If I had to choose between Camorra and Famiglia, I'd try to seek shelter with Luca. I didn't like him, trusted him even less, but he was more than only monster if Aria could be trusted. My children, especially my daughter and Sofia would be safer in his territory. Leonas… I closed my eyes. I needed to stop considering the worst outcome.

Steps crunched beside me on the porch and my eyes flew open. Enzo held up a cup of coffee.

I gave a small smile. "Thank you."

He set the cup down on the small table beside me then sank down on another chair on the porch. He'd been separated from his family for long periods of time as he guarded my family in Minneapolis but he never complained. "Have you heard from Dante?" I asked, even if I knew he hadn't.

He shook his head. "They'll be fine."

I nodded. Anna began braiding Sofia's long hair and sang "Somewhere Qver the Rainbow." My heart thudded hard in my chest. Today wouldn't mark the end of this conflict. It was only the starting point. Dante would seek

revenge no matter what I said. The Outfit yearned for blood. This war would pick up. It would kill many, scar even more, emotionally and physically.

Yesterday, Anna had turned eleven, an age where the future gleamed hopefully before you, but all I could think about was how to protect my girl from the horrors of this world. Who could say if Remo wouldn't try his luck again and this time kidnap my girl?

A small sound escaped my lips.

Enzo glanced my way, his dark brows drawing together. He'd turned fifty this year and his age showed in his face, weathered from the sun. Gray sprinkled his hair and brows. Taft was even older. They were good bodyguards. Dutiful and vigilant. I trusted them but we needed fresh blood and more protection.

"I want a bodyguard for each of my children," I said. Once Leonas was older Dante would insist he could protect himself but for now he, like Anna, needed a bodyguard who protected only him. Taft had brought Leonas to school and protected him there while Enzo had guarded our home with a few men who were responsible for the general perimeter.

"You mean a bodyguard who's assigned specifically to one of them and only pays attention to its ward."

"Yes." Anna sang another song, a sadder melody I didn't recognize. "Especially for Anna. After Serafina's kidnapping, I want her safe. She's growing so fast, and we can't lock her in forever. She needs someone who's going to be at her side at all times."

Enzo nodded. “A few of my men would be good options.”

I knew the men who guarded our house and they were good, but I wanted more for Anna. I wanted someone who was more ruthless. Someone who wouldn’t hesitate to pick the most brutal option if it meant protecting my daughter.

“You want someone else?” Enzo asked.

“Who are the most dangerous men in the Outfit?”

Enzo thought about it. “I can only take soldiers into consideration obviously.”

“Of course.”

“If we judged only by fight skills and level of brutality, certainly Arturo and Santino. They are Dante’s Enforcers for a reason.”

“Okay.”

Enzo shook his head. “I have to be honest, Valentina. Arturo is too… unhinged to be a bodyguard.”

“What about your son?”

“Santino isn’t like me. He’s dutiful but he chose the job of Enforcer for a reason. He likes the thrill and the brutality of it.”

“Would he be a good protector for Anna? Would he keep her safe?”

“I’m sure it would be an honor for him,” he said after a moment of consideration. “I can talk to him.”

“Please do, and once I’m back in Chicago I’d like to have a word with him as well. I’m sure Dante will do the same. Protecting our daughter isn’t something that can be taken lightly.

“Of course not,” Enzo agreed.

I hoped Dante would agree with my choice but he always said he valued my opinion and thought I’d be a good Consigliere, so I might as well make decisions of importance.

My phone rang. I lunged for it on the table and brought it to my ear with shaking fingers. “Dante?” I gasped.

“Val, we’re in the mansion. We’re all fine.”

I released a shuddering breath. Sofia and Anna rushed my way and even Leonas climbed down the tree. “What about Fina?” I whispered.

“She’s okay, physically as far as I can see, but—” He sighed. “Can you come over with the children?”

“Of course. We’ll get ready now.”

“I need to see you,” he said in a low voice, drenched with worry and exhaustion.

“I love you,” I got out. Enzo looked away, trying to pretend he couldn’t hear me. I usually avoided these kinds of emotional exclamations when others were around but right this moment I didn’t care if the whole world listened in.

I heard voices in the background. Dante cleared his throat.

“We’ll be over soon,” I promised then hung up.

Anna and Sofia spoke at the same time. “Was that Dad?”

“Where’s Fina?”

I gave them a shaky smile. “They’re at your house, Sofia. Everyone’s fine.”

Sofia and Anna jumped up and down, cheering, and even Leonas fell in.

I relaxed for the first time that day. Whatever lay ahead of us, we'd get through it.



The moment we stepped into the mansion, Sofia rushed into the living room, where voices were coming from. Leonas, Anna and I followed at a slower pace. Inside we found Sofia hugging Pietro tightly, sitting on his lap. He and Dante sat on the sofa, talking. Samuel, Danilo and Ines weren't present. Anna and Leonas rushed forward as well and pressed to Dante's side. He wrapped his arms around them, yet his smile remained strained. I walked closer. "Where's the rest?"

"Serafina is showering," Dante said with a strange undertone. My stomach hollowed when Pietro blanched and the meaning behind the words registered on me. "Samuel is upstairs with her. Ines in the kitchen, cleaning, and Danilo is in one of the guest rooms."

"Maybe I should check on Ines," I said quietly. Dante nodded. His eyes held mine for a moment, and I wanted nothing more than to throw myself into his arms like Leonas and Anna had done. Instead I turned and went in search for Ines.

I found her scrubbing a cutting board furiously. It was stained from use and impossible to return to its previous state but Ines cleaned it vigorously, tears streaming down

her face, her blonde hair half fallen out of her ponytail. I walked toward her and took the scrub brush from her. Her hands were red. She looked into my eyes, and I had to blink to hold back my own tears.

I hugged her and she buried her face in my neck, sobbing. After a few minutes of crying, she swallowed audibly. “Fina’s got his marks on her throat… she wore her wedding dress and it was ripped and bloody, and she just looked so… broken. He broke her, Val. He… he raped her.”

I bit my lip. “Have you sent for a doctor?”

“Fina doesn’t want to be checked.”

I nodded. Wasn’t that how many rape victims reacted? Their shame was too strong. “Fina is strong like you Ines. She’ll get past this.”

“I hope so. God, I hope so.”

Dante

Pietro and I left the office to give Serafina a moment to talk to Danilo. Samuel leaned against the wall across from the door but he straightened with a frown when I closed the door.

“You let her alone with Danilo?”

Pietro rubbed his forehead. “She insisted.”

“Danilo and Serafina need to talk,” I said.

Samuel stared. “She can’t marry him. She’s not the girl she used to be.”

I didn’t say anything but I feared he was right. Danilo still wanted Serafina and by our rules he had a right to her, but a wedding seemed unlikely given Serafina’s emotional state.

“She’ll recover,” Pietro said. “They can still marry next year when she’s healed.”

I wasn’t sure if Serafina would get over what happened anytime soon. We didn’t even know exactly what she had to endure. Maybe we never would.

Ines hurried our way. “Is Fina with you?”

“In my office talking to Danilo,” Pietro said. Ines stopped beside him, looking anxious to go inside to check on her daughter.

A few minutes later, Danilo emerged, a dark look on his face and Serafina’s engagement ring in his flat palm, like a memorial of what used to be. He looked up. “Serafina, won’t marry me.” His eyes met mine. “I need to talk to my father.” He stalked away, already pulling out his phone.

“I need a word with her,” I said.

“Let me talk to her first. I need to make sure she’s okay after her talk to Danilo.”

I nodded and Ines slipped inside the office.

“The Mancinis won’t like this,” Pietro said quietly. “Our families were meant to become one to strengthen the Outfit. Indianapolis is the most important city in the Outfit.”

“Let’s not worry about it now.”

Ines finally stepped back out, her lips sorrowfully tightened.

“Please be careful, Dante,” she said softly. “She’s gone through enough.”

“I know. But if we want to have a chance to get revenge on Remo for what he did to her, I need to gather information.”

Ines nodded then stepped back and finally let me enter the room.

Serafina stood near the window, looking young and lost. I closed the door quietly. She looked up. My eyes darted to her throat and she pressed her hand over the spot, blushing in shame.

“Don’t.” My voice came out sharper than intended. I moved closer to my niece, watching her closely to see if she was comfortable having me near her. She’d shied away from Danilo and I wasn’t sure how strong her trauma was. “Don’t be ashamed for something forced upon you,” I added in a softer voice, even if it cost me a lot to make it that way because seeing Serafina like this stirred up fury inside of me. “I don’t want to open up painful wounds, Serafina, but as the Boss of the Outfit, I need to know everything you know about the Camorra so I can bring them down and kill Remo Falcone.”

Serafina avoided my eyes. “I don’t think I know anything that will help you.”

“Every small detail helps. Habits. The dynamic between the brothers. Remo’s weaknesses. The layout of the

mansion.”

“Remo doesn’t trust anyone but his brothers and Fabiano. He would die for them,” she whispered.

I’d suspected this. Remo wasn’t as invincible as he thought. If he cared about his brothers in whatever twisted way he was capable of, that meant he was open for attack.

Serafina continued, still not looking my way. “Apart from the family, only Fabiano and Leona are allowed inside the mansion, and occasionally cleaners. Remo keeps a knife and a gun close at all times. He’s a light sleeper…”

She cringed at what she’d revealed. I’d suspected Remo had taken her into his bed. Captors often played with their victims by alternating between treating them like dirt and then showing them hints of kindness to gain their trust. Stockholm Syndrome based on this tactic. The victims ultimately blamed themselves for their rape and even tried to tell themselves they wanted it or gave their captor signals that indicated consent, when neither was the case.

Serafina began to shake, her face torn with guilt and shame.

I moved closer and gently touched her shoulder. “Serafina.”

She surprised me when she leaned against me. I cupped her head, trying to console her.

“What am I going to do? How will I belong again? Everyone will look at me with disgust.”

Blaming the victim was always easy. “If anyone does, you’ll let me know, and I’ll deal with them.”

Serafina nodded against me.

“And you never stopped belonging. You are part of the Outfit, part of this family, nothing changed.”

And yet everything had. We all had. Our family had. Serafina had. None of us had remained untouched by the horrors brought upon us by Remo Falcone.



Danilo asked for a meeting. Naturally, I’d expected it.

We all settled in Pietro’s office. By now, Pietro had at least removed some of the rubble Danilo had left during his rage after the sheets but the place was still a mess. Pietro sank down behind his desk and Samuel stood close to the window, his hands shoved into the pockets of his slacks.

Danilo and I sat down in armchairs across from each other. It was past ten in the evening, but neither of us was eager for sleep.

Danilo let out a deep sigh, twisting the engagement ring in his fingers. “My father insists I’ll marry someone from your family,” he said. “A bond between our families is necessary, especially at this time.”

He was right. We needed to demonstrate solidarity to quiet the dissenting voices. I’d rather not have to silence them with violence. We needed every man in our ranks to fight the Camorra and Famiglia.

Pietro sighed, slumping in his chair. Samuel shook his head with a glare. “Serafina won’t marry. She needs time to heal.”

“There are other options,” I said.

Danilo’s eyes flashed. “What options? I won’t accept the daughter of any other Underboss. My city is important. I won’t settle for less than was promised!”

I narrowed my eyes. “Watch your tone, Danilo. I realize this is a difficult situation but I expect respect nonetheless.”

Danilo glared down at his fist, which held the ring. “I’m not going to settle for less than a bond with your family.”

“You can’t have Fina!” Samuel repeated, taking a step forward, anger twisting his face.

I motioned for him to stay back.

“You can’t have Anna either,” I said sharply. I wasn’t sure if that was what he’d been hinting at. But I wouldn’t promise my daughter to Danilo, not looking into his haunted, angry eyes, not when I knew he wanted Serafina.

Danilo stood. “You need my support in this war. You need a strong family at your back.”

“Is that a threat?” I snarled.

Danilo smiled bitterly. “That’s a fact, Dante. I think you’re a good Capo but I insist I get what my family deserves. I won’t settle for less.”

“I won’t force Fina into a marriage, not after what she went through,” Pietro said.

I nodded. “I agree.”

Danilo shoved his hands into his pockets. “We’re at an impasse then.”

I exchanged a glance with Pietro who briefly closed his eyes. He shoved to his feet and turned his back on us. “Is that what you ask of me, Dante?”

I was being selfish but I couldn’t promise Anna. I just couldn’t. Not now. “Pietro, if we follow the rules, Danilo could demand to marry Serafina. They were engaged.”

Samuel glanced between us, his brows pulling together.

Danilo waited calmly.

Pietro turned around. His eyes were hard and full of warning as he leveled them on Danilo. “I will give you Sofia.”

Danilo scoffed. “She’s what, eleven?”

“Twelve in April,” Samuel corrected, scowling at his father. His hands were curled to fists.

“I’m ten years older than her. I was promised a wife now.”

“You’ll be busy with this war and establishing your reign over Indianapolis. A later wedding should be of advantage for you,” I said. I could tell that Danilo would agree eventually, but he wanted something else.

Danilo glanced down at the ring once more, lost in thought.

“Danilo?”

“I have one condition.”

“What condition?”

Danilo motioned at Samuel. “He marries my sister Emma.”

Samuel’s eyes widened in shock. “She’s in a—”

He stopped himself with a grimace.

Danilo looked murderous. “In a wheelchair, yes. Which is why nobody of worth wants her. My sister deserves only the best, and you are the heir to Minneapolis. If you all want this bond, Samuel is going to marry my sister, and then I’ll marry Sofia.”

“Fuck,” Samuel muttered. “What kind of twisted deal is that?”

“Why?” Danilo growled. “Your father has been testing the waters for possible brides, and my sister is a Mancini. She’s a good match.”

Samuel exchanged a look with Pietro then he looked my way. The Mancini girl wouldn’t find a good husband if not for Danilo’s bargain.

Samuel took a deep breath then he nodded. “I’ll marry your sister.”

Danilo smiled darkly. We all knew this was a deal made in hell.

“Then it’s settled?” Pietro asked. “You’ll marry Sofia and accept the engagement cancellation with Fina?”

“It’s not what I want but it’ll have to do.”

“It’ll have to do?” Samuel growled, stepping forward with narrowed eyes. “That is my baby sister you’re talking about. She’s not some fucking thing you accept as a consolation prize.”

Danilo laughed again. “You might want to remember that as well when you meet my sister.”

“Enough,” I growled. They were riling each other up on purpose when their anger was directed at Remo not each other.

“The wedding will have to wait until Sofia is of age,” Pietro said, looking tired.

“Of course,” Danilo said. “My sister won’t marry before her eighteenth birthday either.”

Pietro nodded.

“Then it’s decided,” I said.

“I have to return home now. We can settle the details at a later point.” Danilo glanced at me for confirmation and I gave a terse nod. “Just one more thing. I don’t want word about Samuel’s bond to my sister to get out yet. She doesn’t need to know this was a deal in exchange for Sofia.”

I nodded again. It really didn’t matter when we’d announce it. People would talk anyway.

He turned and stalked out but Samuel rushed after him.

I hoped they wouldn’t get into a fight but I didn’t bother getting involved. Instead, I walked up to Pietro who held onto the edge of the desk. “Ines will be furious.”

“Danilo is a good catch for Sofia.”

Pietro jerked his head up, angry. “He’d be a good catch for Anna too.”

I couldn’t deny it. An Underboss was the best possible match for my daughter at the moment.

“But you couldn’t let her go, could you?” Reproach carried in his voice, and it wasn’t unfounded.

“It makes sense to give Danilo your other daughter when Serafina cancels the engagement.”

“You can turn it whatever way you want. You didn’t want to give up your daughter. That’s all. Instead you force me to give up mine.”

“You agreed to a bond with Danilo years ago, Pietro. That wasn’t my doing. You wanted a bond between him and Serafina.”

Pietro sighed and straightened. “You are right.” He shook his head. “This feels as if I’m betraying Sofia anyway. Danilo isn’t the boy whom I gave Serafina. This ordeal changed him.”

“He’s not a man who’d abuse a woman, no matter how changed he is by what happened.”

“You’re right. But Samuel marrying the Mancini girl? I don’t know. I feel pity for the poor girl but Samuel needs to produce heirs. Can that girl even bear children?”

I didn’t know, but Carla had been infertile as well and I hadn’t loved her less because of it. “There are other options if it’s the case.”

“I hope now that this is settled we can all return to our normal lives. Ines has been suffering so much. She needs a break.”

“Serafina will heal, and with it our family.”

I wished my words had proven right.

A few months later, Serafina told us she was pregnant with Remo’s child and any hope to forget what had happened was crushed forever.

PART 8

Valentina

We'd all secretly prayed that Serafina's twins wouldn't show any resemblance to their father. It was our only hope at this point, our only chance to give these kids a future in the Outfit.

Ines called me shortly after Serafina gave birth to a son and daughter, Nevio and Greta.

Her breathing was labored, her voice low and desperate. "They look like him."

I held my breath. "His hair?" I'd seen photos of Remo Falcone, the dark hair and even darker eyes.

"The hair, the eyes, everything. Especially the boy. It's as if Remo modeled him after himself to torture us."

"Ines," I said softly. "These kids don't ever need to know who their father is."

She made a choked sound. "They are his spitting image, Val. People will talk. It's impossible not to know whose kids they are. Heaven have mercy, what are we supposed to do?"

"We can't do anything but help Fina deal with the situation. How did she take it?" Some rape victims couldn't

bear it if their children resembled their abuser but so far Serafina had recovered surprisingly well. She'd insisted she wasn't raped. Dante and the others didn't believe her, blaming it on Stockholm Syndrome. I wasn't entirely sure, but I had no right to pry unless Fina confided in me.

"She's completely smitten with them. It's as if she doesn't even notice that they look like Falcones."

"They are her children."

"I know I shouldn't say it, but I wish she would have never gotten them," Ines whispered.

I wasn't sure if Ines had exaggerated about the similarities but when I saw the twins for the first time two days later, it took effort not to show my shock.

Their hair was pitch black and their eyes impossible dark. They didn't look like Cavallaros or Miones. They were Falcones, at least by blood, but they'd learn to be part of our family, of the Outfit.

Later that day, I found Fina in the nursery with her twins, bent over their shared crib, a soft smile on her face. She looked up briefly when I entered before she turned her attention back to her kids.

"I know what everyone's thinking," she said fiercely. "I'm not blind. You all want them gone."

I shook my head. "No, that's not true, Fina. It's difficult for your family to accept who their father is, that's all."

Fina chuckled joylessly. "Why can't they accept it when I can? Why can't they see them for what they are? Innocent children."

I stopped beside her. Nevio and Greta slept close together, their hands touching. They had each other and they'd need their bond to brave the judgment of our world. "It'll take time."

"I'll protect them no matter what it takes."

I squeezed her shoulder. "You are their mother, of course you will."

A knock sounded and Dante poked his head in. "Dinner's ready." He came in, his gaze striking the children before he focused on Fina. He couldn't bear looking at them. I hadn't noticed it before.

"I'll be down in a bit," Fina said with a tense smile.

I followed Dante outside and linked our fingers, facing him. "What was that?"

His brows rose. "What?"

"You couldn't even look at the babies."

Dante's mouth tightened. "If you'd come face to face with Remo Falcone, and then looked at Nevio… damn, Val. That boy's going to look just like that bastard."

"But he isn't Remo. He's Nevio Mione. He's a part of our family, a part of the Outfit."

"I'm not sure the boy can ever be part of the Outfit, at least not in a position of importance. My men would never accept him."

My eyes widened. "Don't tell Fina. Not yet. She'll never forgive you if you punish Nevio for his father's sins."

"I'm not punishing him, but I have to keep the Outfit in mind. A child of Remo Falcone will cause too much discord.

Not to mention that the Falcone blood carries madness."

I pursed my lips. "I think you let your hate for Remo overrule your logic, Dante. Don't lose yourself in useless fury."

He smiled darkly. "Val, whenever I think of Remo, and that is every time I look at Serafina or her children*, all I am* is pure rage and thirst for revenge. I won't rest until I get my vengeance."

I swallowed hard because his eyes showed absolute determination. Nothing I could say would change it. "Don't allow it to destroy everything we care about."

"I won't allow it to destroy anything."



Months passed and we returned to a tentative routine in Chicago. Dante and his men were diligently working on revenge but Dante kept his promise.

The kids and I remained untouched of his pursuit of revenge, and even Dante seemed calmer and less haunted.

I thought we might be on a good way toward mutual ignorance with the Camorra.

Maybe I had been foolish.

Any dream of peace, of normalcy was shattered when Dante, Danilo, Pietro and Samuel got their hands on Adamo Falcone, Remo's youngest brother.

Shortly after Dante got the news about the capture, he got ready to leave for the safehouse where they kept the boy. A boy, only fifteen.

Dante was withdrawn, lost in his thoughts as he put on his jacket over his gun and knife holster. A knife he'd use today?

"Dante," I said quietly. "The boy is fifteen. Serafina said he never hurt her."

"He is not innocent, Val," Dante growled, his eyes flashing angrily. "He's part of the Camorra. He is a Falcone. You don't know the first thing about this family. If you did, you wouldn't even consider asking me to spare Adamo Falcone."

His anger hit me unexpectedly.

I nodded slowly. He was right, I didn't know anything about the Falcones except for the rumors making the rounds and the few things Serafina had said since she'd been freed. What I knew was that Adamo would pay for a crime he hadn't committed yet. Maybe he'd become as cruel as his brothers, but right now he wasn't.

"Leonas will be inducted in three years, will that make him guilty for your crimes as well?"

Dante tensed. "That's not the same."

Wasn't it? I didn't know. In less than two weeks Leonas would turn nine, still a little boy in my eyes, but for our enemies he was a future Capo in the making, a potential enemy.

“Dante?” Pietro called, his voice ringing with open eagerness.

I shuddered.

“I need to leave now. We can continue this discussion tonight.”

He hesitated then he came toward me and kissed my lips before he stalked out. Slowly I walked after him but I stopped halfway down the staircase. Samuel gave his father a grin which he returned. Their hunger for revenge was tangible. Dante didn’t even bother hiding the dark hunger for blood.

I clutched the banister, feeling a little lost.

Before they left, Dante looked up once more but his eyes didn’t reflect conflict. Adamo Falcone wouldn’t be granted any mercy. He’d suffer in his brother’s stead.

I headed downstairs and into the living room where I found Ines, Sofia and Anna with the twins. Nevio was crawling over the floor while Greta clung to Ines. The little girl looked a bit lost without Fina.

“I don’t like that Fina’s going to be there when they torture that Falcone boy.”

Anna gave me a wide-eyed look. I’d hoped she wouldn’t find out about the torture but Ines was lost in her worry and didn’t even realize how much she revealed in front of our girls.

“Fina said the boy is not much older than Sofia and me, only fifteen,” Anna said.

“He’s a Camorrista,” Ines said. Nevio crawled toward me, and I picked him up. His dark eyes flashed up to me, and I tried to imagine how Dante and the other men could see only bad when they looked at this boy.

I sighed. “I don’t know Adamo Falcone.”

“Does he deserve to be tortured?” Sofia asked curiously.

Ines shrugged. “Fina didn’t deserve to suffer either.”

Anna looked at me for answers. I wasn’t sure what to say. Sofia and she were twelve, and they suffered the consequences of Remo’s actions as well. Both were homeschooled, shielded from the outside world, their golden cages more restraining than mine had ever been as a young girl.

Steps rang out and Santino appeared, dragging a struggling Leonas after himself.

“What’s going on?”

“I heard noises from the weaponry, found him stuffing his pockets with guns as if he was gearing up for war,” Santino said with a curl of his lip, releasing Leonas who sent him a glower.

Santino had taken over as Anna’s bodyguard this summer. Dante had been wary of having a former Enforcer close to our daughter but eventually he’d considered him the best option to guarantee Anna’s safety when he wasn’t around.

“Leonas, what is that all about?”

Leonas shrugged, stuffing his hands into his pants. I narrowed my eyes at him. “I just wanted to help Dad deal

with the Falcone bastard."

"Language," I said sharply. "And how did you want to do that?"

Again that stubborn shrug. "Take a cab to the safehouse and help them torture him."

I stared down at my little son, my almost nine-year-old, trying to understand what had happened. This war had taken his innocence too quickly, being surrounded by men thirsting for vengeance and blood. "You won't ever touch a gun without permission again. Understood?"

Leonas' eyes widened marginally at my tone. I'd never raised my voice like that against him before. He nodded eventually.

"Thank you, Santino," I said. He nodded then turned on his heel and left. He'd return to his guard post until we left the house.

Anna rolled her eyes. "You're an idiot. Do you really think Daddy would have allowed you to stay?"

"He knows I can handle stuff unlike *you*."

Anna crossed her arms over her chest. It was a constant argument between the two that Leonas went to school while Anna had to stay home. Sofia nudged her and whispered something in her ear. They got up and hurried away.

I sighed, glancing down at Nevio who squirmed in my hold. Ines sank down on the sofa with a sleeping Greta, looking tired.

"When will we return to Chicago?" Leonas asked.

“Soon,” I said. I put Nevio down on the floor and bent down to be at eye level with Leonas. “Please don’t talk like that in front of your sister and Sofia again. I don’t want any of you to think about what Dad does in his job.”

Leonas tilted his head curiously. “Mom, I’ll be Capo,” he said with absolute certainty and as if that settled the matter.

I smiled wistfully. “I know but until you are initiated you are only my little boy.”

He scrunched up his face as I pulled him against me and pressed a kiss to his cheek. “Mom,” he protested. When I didn’t release him, overcome with emotions, he eventually softened and hugged me. For some reason it felt as if he was consoling me.

Dante

Valentina was already in bed when I returned home that night. My body still hummed with adrenaline from the torture and sweet satisfaction that Remo would hand himself over tomorrow.

I’d dreamed about this day since the moment Remo had kidnapped Serafina. Vengeance was close now.

After checking on Anna and Leonas, I slipped into bed with Val. She turned around and moved closer. Despite our argument today, I felt the same need to hold her against my body. I pressed a kiss to her forehead.

“And?”

“Remo agreed to exchange himself for his brother.” Even I could hear the grim triumph in my voice.

“He must know you’ll torture and kill him brutally but still he hands himself over for his brother?” I could hear the confusion in Val’s sleep-heavy voice. “I thought he didn’t care for anyone.”

“He does for his brothers,” I said neutrally. Val had a tendency to try to see things from two sides, to see beyond someone’s faults, but with Remo, this was pointless.

“You’ll enjoy it, won’t you?”

I wasn’t like some of my men who hungered for the thrill of torturing others, but with Remo I’d enjoy every second of his agony. I brushed my nose along Val’s throat. I didn’t reply, because Val wanted to hear something else. My calm, controlled exterior often let her forget my less than civil nature, the depravity I kept hidden from her and our children and would always do. “Remo won’t receive mercy from either of us.”

Pietro, Samuel, and Danilo were just as eager for bloodshed as me. We’d bring Remo to his knees together, would relish in his demise, and once he was dismembered and purged from this world, we’d figure out a way to leave the burden of his actions behind, to move on.



I drove the car to the meeting point, Danilo beside me. Pietro and Samuel sat on either side of Adamo who hunched forward, breathing heavily.

When I parked the car, he looked up and his eyes met mine in the rearview mirror. Those damn dark Falcone eyes. Only fifteen but he looked like he couldn't care less if I put a bullet in his head or not.

"Time to exchange you for your fucking brother," Samuel said, voice tight with eagerness.

"You don't know anything about Remo if you think he'll give you what you want," Adamo muttered.

"And what do we want, Falcone?" Danilo growled.

"Break him. But my brother is unbreakable. You should have kept torturing me. That would have been more fun."

I pushed open the door. "I don't have time for this nonsense, boy. Your brother is going to break. They all do."

Remo, Nino, and a third man, probably another Falcone brother, waited beside a car. Samuel hoisted Adamo out of the backseat and dragged him toward Danilo, Pietro, and me.

Remo's expression hardened. No sign of his previous triumph or taunting. I gave Samuel a sign and he shoved Adamo toward his brothers. Adamo fell to his knees, holding his broken arm against his body. The way he looked up at Remo revealed a bond that didn't make sense to me, not from what I knew of the Falcones. Remo touched his brother's head in a way I sometimes touched Leonas then they linked arms.

Samuel stepped forward and punched Remo's face, then kicked him in the groin before he smashed his gun against his temple. Remo passed out with that fucking twisted smile on his face. I motioned at a few soldiers. They rushed forward and grabbed Remo then carried him over to a car where they shoved him into a trunk.

The Falcones were already in their car but Nino looked at me with pure calculation.

I got back into the car and we headed back to the safehouse where we'd dismember Remo over the next two days.

Samuel let out a disbelieving laugh and clapped Pietro's shoulder who gave a tense smile. Danilo leaned back with a deep sigh.

"We got him," Samuel said. "We really got him. Fuck. I can't believe we can tear the fucker apart."

"I get the honor of cutting his dick off," Danilo said.

"We agreed on that, yes." Danilo still hadn't gotten over Serafina, or that Remo had dishonored her. His reign over Indianapolis had become more rigorous and brutal than that of his father had ever been, but he was effective and loyal, so I let him do what he felt necessary, even if it was fueled by his unrestrained fury. Maybe after Remo's death, he'd be able to move on. Maybe we all could.

Serafina waited for us in the safehouse. Pietro gave me an uncertain look. He didn't like the idea of her watching the torture, but like Serafina had said: she deserved to be present.

We dragged Remo into the vast hall. I hadn’t said a word to Remo yet, hadn’t even looked directly at him yet. I knew I’d have trouble restraining myself if I did, and I wanted to be behind soundproof walls before that happened.

Serafina paled as she saw Remo.

“Angel,” Remo murmured.

My head turned to him, my brows pulling tight. Angel?

Samuel didn’t give Remo the chance for more words by punching him.

“This is your chance to ask for forgiveness,” Pietro said.

Remo glanced at him until his gaze finally met mine. No sign of fear yet. That would change soon. Every man had a breaking point. He looked at Serafina again. “Do you want me to beg for forgiveness?”

“I won’t give you my forgiveness,” Serafina said. I motioned at Samuel and Danilo to take Remo away to the torture room. Once they were gone, I approached Serafina.

A hint of conflict shone in her eyes. “He will ask for forgiveness in the end,” I said.

Serafina gave me a strange, forlorn smile. “I don’t want him to because it would be false.” She paused. “You will castrate him?”

I preferred not to involve women in the gruesome details of our torture practices, not even Val. I respected her but she tended to be struck by pity even for someone like Remo. Still, Serafina deserved a reply and I couldn’t imagine her being overcome with sympathy for her tormentor.

“Tomorrow. Not today. It would speed up his death too much. Danilo and Samuel will do it. I’m not sure you should watch any of this, but maybe you need to. Today will be easier to stomach than tomorrow, so stay if it’s what you want.”

“Thanks,” she said before she headed over to the screens where she’d be able to watch us handling Remo.

I gave a curt nod toward the guard sitting beside her before I made my way toward the torture room. My pulse sped up, a strange occurrence. Usually it took a bit for torture to get a spike in my heart rate. Not today. This felt almost like the first few times Father had made me be part of torture sessions.

When I entered the room, Remo lay on the bare stone floor while Danilo and Samuel kicked him over and over again.

He didn’t fight the blows only stared up at the camera up in the corner as if he knew Serafina was watching. Pietro unsheathed his knife and cut Remo’s chest. Then Samuel did the same followed by Danilo.

When it was my turn, I squatted beside Remo. He smiled, revealing his blood-coated teeth. “This gives you all a fucking erection, doesn’t it?”

I gave him a cold smile as I withdrew my knife from my holster. “Let’s see how long you will hold on to your arrogance.”

“You really want to talk about arrogance with me, Dante?”

I dug the tip of my knife into his armpit, knowing it was one of the most sensitive spots. Remo tensed but didn't make a sound, his gaze not wavering from mine. He was familiar with pain. His father probably conditioned him like mine had. He'd be a challenge. "Everyone begs in the end."

Remo's mouth pulled wider. "Would you?"

I'd die before I'd beg anyone for mercy. "Don't compare me to you. We're nothing alike."

Remo laughed. "Oh, but we are. That gleam in your eyes, I get it every time I take a knife to someone's skin. It's the fucking best. Do you really think you're something better only because you hide your monstrosity behind a fucking three-piece-suit?"

"Remo, you'll meet my monster, don't worry. Unlike you, I don't rape women to get a power rush." I pushed my knife deeper into his pit then motioned for Danilo to come forward with the lighter.

A few hours later, I cleaned my hands.

Samuel shook his head, muttering. "When's the fucker going to beg? Fuck it."

I glanced at Remo who lay unconscious on the blood-covered floor. He'd passed out again, but hadn't made a sound except for the occasional intake of breath or gritting of his teeth.

Samuel stepped out into the corridor and I followed, then locked the cell.

Pietro and Danilo waited in the corridor, both of them sweaty and disheveled, just like Samuel and me. My shirt

clung to my skin and blood stuck under my nails.

“He’s a tough bastard,” Pietro said and pulled a cigarette out of his pocket then lit it.

“Maybe pain doesn’t bother him, but he’ll show a reaction when I force him to watch while I cut his dick off inch by fucking inch,” Danilo growled.

It was already late. “I’ll sleep here. I won’t leave until Remo’s dead.”

Pietro, Danilo, and Samuel nodded. “One of us should keep watch at any time,” Pietro suggested.

“I’ll start,” Samuel said quickly. “I’m too riled up to sleep anyway.”

“All right.”

We headed into the sleeping quarters and lay down on the cots. I closed my eyes. Despite the satisfaction I’d felt torturing Remo, I couldn’t wait for him to be dead, for this to be finally over.



A shout woke me. I jerked up on the cot, disoriented for a second. Pietro met my gaze from across the room. Danilo wasn’t there.

I jumped to my feet and ran toward the torture room. Fuck, had Remo freed himself? He was badly injured. I couldn’t imagine him having the strength to even stand.

When Pietro and I stormed into the room, Danilo stood in its center.

What I saw made me freeze. Serafina was inside the cell, shielding Remo with her body, her clothes soaked with his blood.

“You shouldn’t be here, dove. This isn’t something for a woman,” Pietro tried to reason with Serafina. He couldn’t see what Danilo and I did. That Serafina had chosen a side and it wasn’t ours.

“Where’s Samuel?” I asked. I hadn’t seen him anywhere. I couldn’t imagine Serafina hurting her twin but maybe I’d underestimated Remo’s manipulation skills and the power he held over her.

Serafina reached under her cardigan and pulled two guns, pointing them straight at us.

I rested my hand lightly on my own gun but I couldn’t bring myself to pull it on my niece. Remo was struggling to stand and didn’t have a weapon.

“Samuel’s going to be okay. He’s knocked out behind the sofa,” Serafina said.

Pietro’s face contorted with horrified realization. “Fina, you’ve been through a lot. Put down the gun.”

Serafina released the safety catch. “I’m sorry.” I’d been faced with many difficult choices in my time as Capo. Today marked the worst. I pulled my gun at the same time as Danilo did. Serafina pulled the trigger and Danilo winced, his hand flying up to grip a bleeding spot on his arm.

“Not a single move.”

Remo moved closer to Serafina, and his eyes met mine. He seemed almost stunned, as if he too was caught off guard by the events. “We only want to leave. No one has to get hurt,” Serafina whispered.

“Dove,” Pietro croaked. “You don’t owe this man anything. He raped you. I know emotions can get confused in a situation like this, but we have people who can help you.”

Serafina’s eyes filled with tears but she shook her head.

Samuel stumbled inside, looking dazed.

Serafina’s face twisted painfully before she looked at me. “Please let us leave, Uncle. This war is because of me, and I can tell you I don’t want it. I don’t want to be avenged. Don’t rob my children of their father. I’ll go to Las Vegas with Remo where I belong, where my kids belong. Please, if you feel guilty for what happened to me, if you want to save me, then do this. Let me return to Vegas with Remo. This doesn’t have to be an endless spiral of bloodshed. It can end today. For your children, for mine. Let us leave.”

Her eyes begged me but I looked away and at Remo. My hatred burnt brighter than ever, realizing he’d taken more than we’d ever anticipated. “Is she speaking in the name of the Camorra?”

“She does. You breached my territory, and I breached yours. We’re even.”

“We’re not!” Samuel roared, stepping forward, swaying. Remo lifted his gun a couple of inches and my fingers on mine tightened. One bullet was all it took…for what exactly?

Turn Remo into a martyr his brothers and the Camorra would go into war for? Because killing him wouldn’t bring us Serafina back.

“You kidnapped my sister and broke her. You twisted her into your fucking marionette. We won’t be done until I’m standing over your disemboweled corpse so my sister is finally free of you.”

Serafina looked close to tears. “Sam, don’t do this. I know you don’t understand, but I need to return to Vegas with Remo, for myself, but more importantly for my children.”

“I knew you should have gotten rid of them,” Samuel said. Maybe the twins had changed Serafina’s feelings for Remo, intensified whatever twisted bond they shared. Children changed everything, I knew that.

“Send them with him to Las Vegas. They are Falcones, but you aren’t Fina. Be free of them and him. You can start a new life,” Pietro said.

Serafina shook her head. “Where my children go, I will go. Don’t you think I’ve suffered enough for all of your sins? Don’t turn me into another pawn in your chess game. Set me free.” She turned to me once more. “Let us leave. You failed me once, and now I’m lost to you. But please allow me to bring my children to a family that will love them. Allow me to bring my children home. You owe it to me.”

I’d owed her protection on the day of her wedding and a quicker rescue, but this, I didn’t owe her, and yet I felt like I did. “If I allow you to leave today, you are a traitor. You won’t

be part of the Outfit. You will be the enemy. You won't see your family again. There won't be peace with the Camorra. This war has only begun."

"When will this war ever end, Uncle?"

I met Remo's gaze. He regretted nothing. This war between the Camorra and the Outfit would never end, definitely not in my lifetime.

I had often imagined how I'd set Serafina free by killing the man who tormented her. It had been my driving force.

Everything faded to the background, Samuel's stunned expression, Pietro's anguish, Danilo's fury as I stared into my niece's eyes.

This was about revenge. Revenge for her. Revenge she didn't want.

I had to set her free, not because of her, because of Val and my children, because of Ines and Sofia. We needed to let go of her because Serafina was already lost. Maybe we'd lost her the moment Remo captured her. Maybe all the months of hoping had been wasted. Serafina had made her choice and today I had to make mine.

I wouldn't drag the Outfit into a bloody war with the Camorra for her, not when she chose a life with Remo. Nino and his brothers would retaliate if I killed Remo. I would have done it gladly if it would have served its purpose, but it couldn't. Serafina would never return to us, and her children had always been Falcones anyway.

I would protect the people who wanted my protection, who needed it more than Serafina.

“Leave,” I said coldly.

Danilo jerked, shock flashing across his unshaven face. “You can’t be serious, Dante. You can’t let them go.”

I understood Danilo’s anger, his need for vengeance, but neither he nor I could get what we wanted, not today, maybe never.

“Set me free,” Serafina said again.

“Leave.”

“Thank you.”

“Don’t thank me. Not for that.” I’d allowed a girl to be given to a monster many years ago, a monster she hadn’t chosen. Aria had survived. Serafina had chosen her own monster, her fate. She was no longer my responsibility. Many in the Outfit would be outraged by my decision but it was my last gift toward my niece.

Serafina and Remo left.

Anna, Leonas, and Val would be safer now.

A sense of finality, of utter shock hung in the room.

THE AFTERMATH

PART 1

Dante

“How could you do this?” Danilo roared, contempt twisting his face.

“You left her at the mercy of a monster. You should have never let her go,” Samuel agreed.

Pietro didn’t say anything, but his expression held the same accusation I saw on theirs.

“She chose him over us. She asked me to leave.”

“You should have forced her to stay. You should have put a bullet through Falcone’s fucking head, or let me do it if you didn’t have the courage to do it,” Danilo muttered. Samuel nodded, leaning against the wall because he was still weak from the tranquilizer.

“Careful,” I said quietly. “I can assure you I won’t hesitate to put a bullet into your head if you ever disrespect me again, Danilo.”

Danilo swallowed hard. He was young, driven by rage and wounded pride—a dangerous combination. “You promised I’d get my revenge for what was taken from me. You promised I’d be the one to kill Falcone, but today you let

him go. You let our enemy walk out of our territory. That's betrayal of the Outfit. The Camorra would have been weaker without Remo Falcone."

"The Camorra would have sought retribution."

"And now they won't?" Samuel asked sharply. "We tortured the bastard to within an inch of his life. The Falcone's will attack our territory again."

"Possibly, but they have more to lose now."

"You mean my daughter and grandchildren," Pietro said quietly. "What I wonder is if you would have let Anna walk away with a Falcone if it was her in Fina's stead?"

"Right now, Fina is under Remo's control. His power over her is too strong to break. She would have resented each of us if we'd killed the father of her children. We would have had a potential spy in our own rows. And you saw what she did. She shot at Danilo. She betrayed the Outfit for Remo. She drugged her own twin. If I'd stuck to the rules, I would have had to declare her a traitor and then subject her to your judgment, Pietro. Your men would have expected you to punish her for what she did, or you would have lost their respect."

"I would have stepped down from my position as Underboss then. Samuel could have taken over."

"Then it would have been his task to punish his twin."

Samuel and Pietro exchanged a look. Neither of them would have ever hurt Serafina, nor would I. Yet, our world was a harsh one, with even harsher consequences if you broke the rules.

“I couldn’t allow that. I need you. The Outfit needs to be strong.”

“We would have been stronger with Remo dead,” Danilo said bitterly. “You took our revenge from us.”

“You got revenge. You tortured him for two days.”

“And what good was that? The fucker didn’t cry, didn’t beg for his fucking life once. I bet he’s laughing at us now,” Samuel said.

Pietro stepped up to me. “You still didn’t answer my question, Dante. Would you have let Anna go if she loved the enemy?”

I wasn’t sure.

Pietro shook his head. “I lost my daughter today. I won’t ever get her back.”

I touched his shoulder. “You don’t know that. Remo Falcone is a monster. She’ll realize it eventually.”

Danilo scoffed. “Aren’t we all?”

I sent him a hard look. On any other day, he would have been dead by now, but emotions were still running high.

“I won’t have a war at two fronts. The Camorra and Famiglia only cooperate loosely right now, but if they both attack with full force we’ll have a hard time holding them off.”

We walked into the hall where Pietro grabbed his coat and motioned for Samuel to follow him.

“Where are you going?”

“I have to tell Ines that our daughter is gone, that you gave her up without good reason.”

“I’m heading back home. Or do you need me for anything else?” Danilo asked, his voice clipped and eyes hard. “I have a duty to the Outfit to fulfill after all.”

“No,” I said, fighting to keep my own emotions in check.

Danilo left without another word, and Samuel and Pietro followed shortly after. I ran a hand through my hair, my eyes following the trail of blood on the floor that Remo had left behind. Was this the best for the Outfit? I believed so. Remo had given his life for his brother. What would he do for his children?

I had thought about the way he had looked at Serafina when he called her angel. In some twisted way, he cared for her and he would for the twins as well. He had something to lose now, and it would make him more restrained. Since Luca had kids, he’d held back with rash actions too.

But even if it wasn’t the best solution for the Outfit, it was the choice that would keep my children and Val safe. I’d always choose them over the Outfit. One day Leonas would take over but I had to make sure he was protected until then.

Grabbing my keys and coat, I headed to my car and drove back to the mansion, knowing full well I’d be greeted with chaos.

A door slammed shut, and I sat up in bed where I'd been reading, unable to fall asleep while Dante was in the safehouse torturing Remo. I slipped out of bed and slid a bathrobe on. I walked closer when a female cry rang out: Ines.

I froze on the staircase at the scene playing out before my eyes. Ines was clutching Pietro's shirt, shaking her head. Her hair was a mess and her face frantic.

Sofia, Anna, and Leonas crept down the steps but hovered close to me, obviously as confused as I felt.

"What's going on?" I asked.

Samuel shot me a glare. "Dante let Remo go!"

I headed downstairs. "Why would he do that?"

The door opened and Dante stepped in, looking as if had come straight from a battlefield.

"Ask him," Samuel spat.

Dante narrowed his eyes.

Ines staggered toward Dante, accusation looming on her face. "You handed my daughter over to the man who raped her?"

"Ines," Dante said in a voice meant to placate her, his gaze briefly darting to the children. "Serafina chose him. She helped him."

Ines raised her arm and struck Dante across the face. Leonas gasped beside me. Anna and Sofia watched with open-mouthed shock and my own body seized up with horror.

Pietro quickly grabbed her wrist and pulled her against him, but his expression was full of fury toward Dante as well. “She’s confused! You should have stopped her. You stole my daughter from me. You took her away.”

Tears slid down Ines’ porcelain skin.

“I did what I thought was the best,” Dante said as if Ines hadn’t just slapped him.

“For whom?” Ines whispered harshly, nodding toward Anna. “For your daughter?”

Dante simply looked at her.

“What about the twins?” I asked.

“She took them with her,” Samuel muttered.

“Wasn’t it her choice then?”

Dante gave a small shake of his head, wanting to keep me out of the conflict but I wouldn’t let him brave their anger alone.

Ines gave me a sad smile. “Of course, you stand by him even when he sacrifices my family.”

“Leave Val out of this,” Dante clipped.

Ines began shaking. “Out of my house. All of you.”

I blinked.

“Mom,” Sofia began but Ines stormed toward Dante and pushed against his chest. “Out. Of. My. Home!”

“Ines—” Dante tried again but she shook her head and stormed off.

“Leave,” Pietro said.

Dante straightened his shoulders and gave a nod. I wasn’t sure what was happening, completely stunned and

overwhelmed.

“Grab your things,” I told Leonas and Anna. They hesitated but I nudged them upstairs and finally they moved.

I followed quickly and put on jeans and a pullover over my nightgown, then slid into sneakers barefoot. Grabbing my overnight bag, I hurried back out.

“Leonas, Anna!”

They joined me a moment later, looking completely terrified. “What’s going on?” Anna asked.

I shook my head. I wasn’t sure.

When we arrived in the lobby, Pietro held the front door open as if he couldn’t wait to have us out of their house as quickly as possible. Santino waited on the front steps while Taft and Enzo sat in two cars.

Samuel and Ines were gone.

Sofia was pressed to Pietro’s side and it broke my heart when she and Anna hugged tightly as if this was a final goodbye. It wasn’t. It couldn’t be.

I took Dante’s hand, needing to show him my support. He squeezed lightly. “I hope you’ll understand my decision soon.”

Pietro held Sofia even tighter against his side. “I understand, Dante. You protected your own children and gave up one of ours in turn. It’s not the first time.”

I wasn’t sure what he meant.

We stepped out and Pietro closed the door.

I took Anna with my free hand and Dante gripped Leonas' hand, and together we headed toward our car.

I didn't look back, not willing to make this feel like a true goodbye.

We drove a while before Leonas spoke up from the backseat, sounding confused. "Why did you allow Uncle Pietro to throw you out? This is your city too."

Dante nodded, not taking his eyes off the street. He looked exhausted. How long had he been awake? "It is, but it's Pietro's home, it's his family, and even as Capo I have to respect that, and especially as part of their family. They need time to mourn."

"But Fina isn't dead," Anna whispered.

"No, she isn't," Dante said. "But she's lost to us."

Anna bit her lip, glancing out of the window. "Sofia said Fina is in love with Remo, and that she wants to raise the twins with him."

"It's not love," Dante said.

Wasn't it? Maybe twisted love, but love often came with pain and sacrifice. I didn't know what Fina felt, much less what went on in Remo Falcone, but I didn't share Dante's certainty either way.

"How do you know?"

"Because Serafina isn't herself, not right now. If she were, she wouldn't have betrayed her family, her upbringing, simply everything for a man like Remo Falcone."

I touched his thigh. Anna's eyes were wide and uncomprehending. This was difficult as it was. I didn't want

to unsettle her more.

Dante cleared his throat and his expression smoothed.

“Will I see Sofia again?” Anna asked softly.

I turned in my seat with a smile. “Of course.”

Dante didn’t say anything.



We remained in a state of shock after Serafina left with Remo. A stronger, more lingering paralysis than after her kidnapping, because this felt more permanent. When Remo had kidnapped Serafina we’d been certain to get her back, that we’d do everything in our power *to bring* her back home. This time a sense of final loss lingered in our minds and hearts. One that even the most daring hope couldn’t dispel.

Our family was broken. For the first time, I worried we wouldn’t be able to fix it.

Ines and Pietro had thrown us out of their house. Ines and Samuel hadn’t even said goodbye. I could feel Ines’ pain almost like my own. She’d lost her daughter, not to death but the end result might be the same. Just thinking of losing Anna turned my heart to ice. Dante had increased safety measures. We wouldn’t allow a repeat performance. Anna would be safe even if the golden cage had become even smaller, even more oppressing. Her safety was Dante’s top priority. Santino was her constant shadow now.

We’d arrived in Chicago early in the morning and Dante had disappeared in his office right away, without any sleep after hours of driving, and hadn’t emerged since. I knocked, waiting for his reply. Gabby had brought him a few cups of coffee but he hadn’t eaten anything.

“Come in.”

He sounded tired and as I stepped in, I found that he looked it too.

He bowed over his desk, his hair in disarray, a rare sight and sign for his inner turmoil. I closed the door after me and regarded my husband for a long time, worrying deeply about him. He finally looked up, a look of stark concern in his eyes. I showed him the tray with bread and cheese. “You need to eat.”

His eyes followed me as I moved toward him, trying to hide my own anxiety. Dante had asked me not to hide my feelings from him, but right now he needed me strong. The weight resting on his shoulders was already too heavy for him. I’d called Bibi in the afternoon to get a feel for the current mood in the Outfit. Dario was well connected as the Outfit’s lawyer. To say that everyone was in a state of turmoil would have been an understatement.

“You are not alone. I’m here. Talk to me. Don’t draw back from me again.”

Dante leaned back in his chair with a sigh. “I’m not drawing back from you, Val. You are my lifeline. You and our children.”

I touched his shoulder and he surprised me by pulling me onto his lap. The last year had been hard, almost unbearably so. We needed to find our way out of the darkness clouding our life right now. “We’ll get through this together.”

Dante nodded slowly. “I hope Ines, Pietro and Samuel forgive me eventually.”

“You did what was right.”

“Did I?” His eyes flickered with doubt and worse with guilt. “I ripped Serafina away from her family. I allowed her to leave for an uncertain future. The Falcones are unpredictable at best. They are madmen. I only met their father Benedetto once and trust me, any child of his must be deranged.”

“She chose him, Dante. She isn’t a child.”

“I know, but it’s difficult to admit that eventually children outgrow the rules we set for them.”

“Why don’t you eat and lie down a bit afterward?”

Dante shook his head. “I invited your parents for dinner. I need to talk to your father. We need to make plans to ensure the Outfit’s power.”

I sighed and kissed his cheek. “At least, eat something.”

Dante took a slice of cheese and slid it into his mouth. I stood but Dante caught my hand. “I want you present when I talk to your father.”

“Okay,” I said slowly. He gave a terse nod. With an encouraging smile, I walked out, leaving him to his thoughts.

Leonas rushed my way. “Can Ricci and R.J. come over tomorrow?”

“R.J.?” I asked.

“That’s Rocco’s new name. It’s much cooler.”

I tousled Leonas’ hair.

“Mom!” he said indignantly, ducking away from my fingers. “My hair!”

I laughed. Did the vanity phase start this early nowadays? God, he was growing up so quickly, and Anna too. A deep longing filled me, for another baby, another small human to take care of and remind us of the beauty of life and our glowing future. Because I still believed in it: a good future.

“Of course, they can.” I’d been worried how the Rocco senior situation would affect Leonas’ friendship with the man’s sons, but luckily it hadn’t. His lack of fatherly compassion had something good after all. Leonas grinned, smoothed out his hair, and rushed away again. Almost nine. I needed to organize his birthday party even if it felt like we were stuck in a time of mourning. Life had to go on, especially for our children.

Dante and I had been trying to get pregnant for two years now. It hadn’t worked. I’d even considered doing hormone treatment but with everything else that had been going on, I didn’t want to push my body more than necessary. Maybe I had to accept that I was too old, even if many women got children well past forty and I was only thirty-six.

I went down into the basement, past our panic room, and picked up the box with Christmas decorations. I hadn't found time to put them up yet, but now that we'd returned to Chicago for good, I wanted to create a Christmas spirit. After I'd sorted through the decoration, I called Anna and Leonas down. Anna had spent the last hour on the phone with Luisa and didn't look as crushed anymore.

"But we don't have a tree yet," Anna said thoughtfully, as she lifted one of the delicate glass baubles.

"You're right. We'll get one tomorrow. Let's decorate the rest of the house for now. How about you prettify all the fireplaces?"

Anna and Leonas grabbed a few items and dashed toward the fireplace in the living room where they began to brainstorm the best decoration. I watched them for a bit, my heart warming.

A few minutes later, the bell rang and Gabby hurried toward the front door. Zita wasn't as mobile anymore—she was getting old—and so Gabby had been taking over more of her duties.

My parents stepped inside. Dad, too, had become completely gray and the wrinkles in his face had become deep furrows, but Mamma led a strict food regime and so he was still fit for mid-sixty. Mamma kept dying her hair brown, too vain to let a hint of gray show. She smiled when she spotted me, despite the anxiety in her eyes, and rushed toward me. We hugged longer than usual. "I'm so glad you're back."

Papa embraced me as well and kissed my forehead. “How’s everyone?”

“The kids are putting up the Christmas decoration, and Dante is in his office.”

Papa nodded with a solemn expression.

“Mamma, can you help Leonas and Anna? Papa and I need to talk to Dante.”

Mamma nodded and hurried into the living room.

Papa searched my face. “He puts a great deal of trust in you. And he’s absolutely right. You are clever and sensible.”

“I won’t become Consigliere,” I said firmly, surprising me but not Papa. I’d occasionally fantasized about the position, but after everything that had happened with the Camorra, I’d realized I didn’t want to be part of decisions like that. I didn’t want to be responsible for having teenage boys tortured, for all the other horrible things happening in this war. I’d still give Dante my opinion if he asked for it, and even if he didn’t, but that was all.

Papa nodded. “It’s for the best, Val. Right now, isn’t the best time for that kind of change anyway, and I’d rather not have you involved in everything we do. Women should be protected. The more you get involved, the more you get targeted by our enemies.”

Fina hadn’t been involved and still been attacked, but ultimately I agreed with my father. “I guess that means you’ll have to live forever so you can advise Dante.”

Papa laughed. “This disgusting low-carb and white meat diet your mother tortures me with has to be good for

something.” He paused. “I still want to see my third grandchild grow up, or have you and Dante given up?”

I bit my lip. We hadn’t discussed it in a while but we hadn’t taken countermeasures either. “No, but maybe it’s not meant to be.” Sadness rang in my voice, betraying my lack of acceptance on the matter.

Papa touched my cheek. “Maybe now is the perfect time. We all need something good.”

I nodded but didn’t say anything. We headed toward Dante’s office and entered after I knocked. Dante looked less tousled than before and stood with a composed expression to shake my father’s hand. His mask was in place, impenetrable and strong.

“How’s the general mood?” Dante asked as we settled on the armchairs in front of the fireplace.

Papa shrugged. “Divided. Many are glad to be rid of the Falcone twins. You know how people worried that their looks would eventually draw Remo’s attention, and that man’s attention is never a good thing. It’s better to be rid of them and him. An escalation of the war with the Camorra and the Famiglia is something many want to avoid at all costs. Luckily, the Underbosses seem to sway toward this opinion.” He sighed. “There are the others, of course. The people who think you should have killed Remo and led attacks on both the Famiglia and Camorra.”

Dante nodded thoughtfully. “I assume Pietro and Danilo are among them.”

“Possibly, but neither have made their opinion on the matter public. They are family, or going to be family in Danilo’s case. That’s an advantage.”

“Pietro won’t badmouth you in front of others,” I said. Even if Ines, Samuel, and Pietro were heartbroken and even blamed Dante for it, they were still family and neither of them was prone to emotional outbursts out of vengeance.

“He’s a loyal man,” Dante said, a hint of regret swinging in his voice.

“He is,” Papa agreed. “I have to be honest. Even the people who think you made the wise choice worry. The Famiglia and the Camorra will join forces, now more than ever, to destroy us and split our territory.”

“Luca’s got Marcella and Amo to protect. Remo’s got Nevio and Greta. Do you really think they’ll let this war escalate?” I said.

Dante raked his fingers through his hair, lips thinning. “I doubt Luca will increase his efforts. Remo is difficult to read but he too will probably think twice now before risking anything.”

“Is there a way we can push them apart? To cause dissent between Remo and Luca?”

Papa laughed.

Dante too smiled bitterly. “Theirs is a bond of convenience. Luca and Remo aren’t allies or friends, they are temporarily ignoring each other. It doesn’t take much to have these two at each other’s throat again.” Dante looked out of the window for a moment before he continued. “I

won’t stir up a conflict between them, not at the current time. We might get caught up between their fronts and I won’t make peace with either of them.”

I’d feared that was the case. “How are we going to win this war?”

“We can’t win,” Dante said. “I don’t think either of us can win.”

I exchanged a confused look with Papa.

“Then what?” he asked.

“Our goal must be to make us untouchable. The Camorra and Famiglia can remain our enemies, as long as they hesitate to act on it, I don’t care.”

I tilted my head. “How do we make us untouchable? New allies? But even then, it would be two against two as long as the Camorra and Famiglia work together.”

“The Corsican Union won’t risk being dragged into our war, and you can’t consider a bond with the Bratva, do you?” Papa asked Dante, horrified.

Dante made a dismissive sound. “Even if the Bratva might be open for a loose cooperation now that their non-aggression pact with Falcone has broken, which I doubt, I have absolutely no interest in cooperating with Grigory. They are as bad as the Camorra. Our values are worlds apart.”

Few things were untouchable. The police, for the most part. We bribed them, threatened a few of them, but we didn’t attack any of them. As long as we didn’t target them and paid them enough, they ignored our presence, except

for the occasional arrest of soldiers or our drug dealers. My brows drew together. What had Dante in mind?

“Giovanni, this is where your contacts come into play, and you, too, Val will be vital for my plan.”

“My contacts?” Papa asked.

“Yes, you know how to present yourself in certain circles. That’s the kind of man I need at my side.”

Papa narrowed his eyes in thought. “What kind of circles?”

But I had already caught up. Since I didn’t manage the casino anymore, my main job had been to chat up the politicians and their wives. The men were good customers in our brothels and casinos, and many of them enjoyed a discount on cocaine or heroin. Their wives loved the parties we threw, the thrill of the forbidden, and most importantly our almost limitless funds.

“You’re playing golf with senators and the mayor. You have always managed to keep the underworld rumors about your family to a minimum. You are the man who will help me lead the Outfit to a new cooperation.”

Realization descended over Papa’s face. “You want to get a foot into the political scene.”

“Yes, I think we need to make us even more indispensable for the political elite in our city and state. You are friends with a few senators.”

“They will be wary about being associated with organized crime. It’s nothing that gets them any extra points in elections.”

“Unlike the Camorra and the Famiglia, we have been careful. While there are speculations making the rounds, we can’t be linked to any scandals. Elections are coming up. I’m sure you know of a few ambitious senators striving to become more. Let’s help them reach for the stars if they help us too.”

“If we have more friends in the political elite, it might protect us from attack,” I said.

“And it could be good for business too, lucrative contracts, legalization of certain forms of gambling,” Papa mused.

Dante nodded. “Indeed. I want to make the Outfit ready for the future, and I think our way needs to be to blend in even better, to appear as sheep and hide the wolf within.”

“I’m going to start testing the waters. I’m playing golf with Clark senior tomorrow. Maybe he can have a word with his son.”

“His wife is from Italian descent?”

Papa nodded. “They vacation in Italy every year. They have a mansion at the shores of Lake Como.”

“It’ll take some convincing. Many of my more old-fashioned men won’t like this new direction I’m taking,” Dante said.

I smiled, feeling a new sense of hope. “You’ll convince them.”

PART 2

Dante

I’d never seen the appeal of playing golf. If I wanted to hit a target, I shot my gun, if I wanted to exert myself, I chose a sport that actually got my heart rate up, and if I wanted to engage in business negotiations, I preferred to sit down and talk without any distractions.

Yet, I found myself on a golf course in early Spring with Maximo Clark, Giovanni and the old Clark Senior. We engaged in meaningless chitchat for a while, as was habit in those circles, even if I wanted to cut to the chase. I had more important things to do.

The Clark family have been important players in the political game for decades. They were political royalty. Clark Senior, who had been Senator before his son, had a penchant for our underground casinos and the complimentary girls. His son, the current Senator, was a harder nut to crack. Even if his first name was Italian, thanks to his mother, he was wary of intensifying contacts with the Outfit.

“You want to become Governor?”

Maximo Clark leaned on his golf club, a hint of suspicion on his face. He was a born politician, a turncoat and opportunist. I didn't trust him and he didn't trust me. "I do, indeed."

"Your chances are good," Clark senior said. "We only need the right campaign to give you a push."

"Good campaigns are expensive," Maximo said.

"They are indeed," Giovanni agreed.

I hated beating about the bush, all these veiled hints. Stifling my annoyance, I gave a tight smile. "Money isn't an issue."

Maximo smiled, all sharp teeth and condescension. "It can become an issue if it derives from the wrong sources."

"It's a matter of interpretation what's determined a wrong source," I said. "We have close connections to the gun lobby. They are one of your main sponsors if I'm not mistaken, and some people might argue that their money is blood money too." I flashed my teeth at him, done playing nice.

His smile became tenser. "I assume you're hoping for favorable legislation, for influence and the occasional amnesty?"

"That, and involvement. We want to become part of the public eye, of your social circles. We need the light."

"Some things are better left in the dark," Maximo said.

"Indeed." I narrowed my eyes. Maybe he didn't visit our establishments, but his father and brother did. It would be

bad press for him if word got out. No matter how white his vest, his family's dirt would stick to it.

He was well-acquainted with veiled threats.

"In the long term, we'd like to have one of ours in senate to really solidify our connections."

Maximo raised his brows. "Yourself?"

I smiled. My name and face were too well known, too closely linked to less savory endeavors. "No. Dario Fabbri is a good option. He's one of the most capable lawyers in Chicago as you certainly know."

Maximo's eyes remained carefully blank. "I'll have to think about it."

"Do that," I said, then glanced at my watch. "I'll have to head out now. You enjoy yourself." I nodded at Giovanni and Clark Senior before I gave Maximo another hard smile.



The moment I stepped into the lobby of our home, Val strode toward me, curiosity reflecting on her beautiful face. She looked stunning in a tight pencil skirt and silk blouse tugged into the narrow waistband.

I kissed her. "You look gorgeous."

Val smiled woefully, turning around so I could see that the top of the skirt's zipper was open. "This is the last time I get to wear it for a while. It's just too tight. Even stretch can only go so far."

I gently placed my palm against her bump, still marveling at this miracle. I hadn't expected another baby. We'd been trying for so long, but then it happened like a sign from above in the worst period of our life: a glimmer of hope. Our miracle baby.

"How are you?"

Val covered my hand with hers. "We're both good. She's moving more every day."

"Only four more months."

"Enough of me, tell me how it went?"

My mood dropped.

"That bad?"

"Not bad, but Maximo Clark is a snake. He plays hard to get."

"He needs our money if he wants to fund his campaigns."

"Our funds will make things easier. He might be good without them as well however."

Val pursed her lips. "Can't you put pressure on him?"

I laughed. "Blackmail is always a good option, but it might be a bad start to our cooperation and he doesn't have any skeletons in his cupboard. Blackmailing him with his father's or brother's nightly activities might hurt his reputation or it might make him look like the noble king."

"Everyone's got skeletons in their cupboard," Val murmured. "And I've met his wife a couple of times. She's out for the glitz, the glamor. She talks about the British Royal family nonstop. She dreams about being royalty

herself, about being part of a society other people only talk about. She's fascinated by our traditions, our weddings. For her, this is like one of her historical romances come true."

"I gather your lunch with her went well?"

Val's expression became wicked. "It did. Of course, I told her everything she wanted to hear. She was absolutely enamored by our arranged marriages. She thinks it's just *utterly romantic*, like something straight out of a Shakespeare play." Val imitated the woman's enthusiastic lilt.

"Romantic. That's a new take on it," I said as we headed into my office. We settled on my sofa, my arm around Val's shoulders.

"From what I gathered, her marriage to Maximo leaves quite a bit to be desired."

I perked up. "Does he have an affair?"

"She didn't mention anything. She isn't that airheaded. She knows how to keep up a perfect public front."

I stroked Val's knee that the slit in her skirt had revealed. "Shame."

Val's expression became thoughtful. "Her words made me think though." She hesitated then shook her head. "Maybe my brain's muddled by pregnancy hormones."

I twisted around to her fully. "What is it?"

"Anna and Leonas both will have arranged marriages." She searched my eyes and then it dawned on me and my first knee-jerk reaction was to say no.

“You suggest marrying Anna off to Maximo Clark’s son?” Despite my best intention, my voice shook with protectiveness.

Val bit her lip. “It is an option. I know a traditional arranged marriage isn’t common in the outside world, but the political elite often marries among each other as well.”

I’d met Maximo Clark’s children twice. He had three of them. His oldest son Clifford was Anna’s age, his twin girls a few years younger. They were polite, raised to behave in public.

“She’d be safer in a marriage with an outsider, and if our children married into important political families that would solidify our contacts.”

I tried to consider this from a logical standpoint but when Anna was concerned objectivity was difficult to maintain.

“They know each other. He’s at the same tennis club,” Val said. “I could talk to Anna if you’d like to get her take on things.”

I sighed. “Thinking of promising Anna to anyone makes my blood boil.”

“She can’t stay our little girl forever. She turns thirteen in September. She’s growing up.”

“I know.” Val didn’t look too happy about the prospect of a possible bond between Anna and the Clark boy either. “You don’t look convinced.”

Val smiled strangely. “I’m just being a bit emotional. I wanted a love marriage for our children.”

“Our arranged marriage turned into a love marriage, and so did Ines and Pietro’s. It’s possible.”

“It is, of course, but still.”

“Let’s keep your plan in mind for now and don’t share it with anyone yet. I want to wait for Maximo’s decision regarding a cooperation first. If he refuses to establish stronger business and social connections with us, he certainly won’t agree to a bond between our children.”

Val leaned her head against my shoulder. “I talked to Ines today.”

I tensed. “And?” I hadn’t talked to my sister since she’d thrown us out of their house.

Pietro and I had come to a tentative understanding, and even Samuel had come around to my surprise, but Ines still mourned Serafina’s absence. “She asked about the baby, and when Anna would come to visit again.”

“What did you say?”

“I told her Anna will visit next week.”

Anna would start private school this year for the first time. She’d insisted and I couldn’t deny her any longer. She and Luisa didn’t want to be homeschooled anymore.

“I suggested that we could vacation at the Great Lakes together this July.”

My chest tightened. “And?” I tried to keep my expression neutral, even if it was useless. Val knew that Ines’ refusal to talk to me bothered me deeply.

Val touched my chest. “She agreed. But she suggested the Mione’s family lodge in Barron County.”

“Good.”

“Yeah.”

As usual, Val’s warm smile set me at ease like few things in this world could.



Pietro, Ines, Samuel, and Sofia had arrived two days ago in the Mione vacation home and had already settled in. Pietro’s Range Rover parked in front of the two-floor timber lodge. I hadn’t seen Ines in seven months, and I couldn’t deny that I felt a hint of apprehension about our first encounter. Leonas and Anna jumped out of the Mercedes the moment we stopped; Anna to dash toward the house and Leonas down to the jetty leading into the lake. Val laughed then awkwardly pushed herself out of the seat, cradling her belly and tilting her head up to meet the sun. I pressed my palm into her lower back, then gave our bodyguards a curt nod. They could settle into the guard house nearby.

“Leonas! Say hi first,” Val called. Leonas dragged himself away from the water with obvious reluctance and ran back to us. He stormed past us and through the front door which Anna had left open. “Just witnessing his energy gives me backlash,” Val said with a laugh. “I hope Beatrice is a calm kid. We’re not getting any younger.”

Hearing Val say our unborn daughter’s name filled me with calm and joy. It had from the first moment we’d decided

on it. *She who makes happy* was the meaning of the name. It couldn't have been more fitting. She came into our life when everything was in shambles and we seemed to have come to an impasse and showed us that the future still held many wonders and opportunities.

"You're young," I said, stroking her back.

Val gave me an amused look. Then her expression became tight as we entered the lodge and followed the voices into the vast living area with the floor-to-ceiling windows sandwiching a fireplace between them and with a majestic view over the lake. It was too warm outside for a fire though.

Anna and Sofia huddled together on the sofa, talking animatedly, and Leonas showed his new Swiss knife to Samuel. Pietro had his arm wrapped around Ines. My sister had lost weight. Her eyes met mine.

She peered up at Pietro who rubbed her upper arm in encouragement. Ines walked over to us. She smiled at Val and touched her belly. "My God, you're already so big."

"I know!" Val said then pulled Ines into an embrace.

I went over to Pietro and shook his hand then Samuel's. "She's forgiven you," he said quietly.

I glanced back at Val and Ines. "Because of the wedding?"

The wedding between Remo Falcone and Serafina a couple of months ago had been the scandal of the year.

"She had already forgiven you before that, but the Cavallaro pride kept her from admitting it," Pietro said.

Ines looked my way and for a moment neither of us moved. In the past it had always been Ines who'd made the first move, getting over her pride more easily than I did, but this time I walked over to her. Val stepped back and greeted Pietro and Samuel.

"Ines," I said quietly. "I'm glad you agreed for our families to spend our vacation together."

Ines rolled her eyes. "Don't sound so official, as if we're distant acquaintances."

"In the last few months we were hardly more than distant acquaintances," I said.

She nodded. "I'm not mad at you anymore. I'm still mad at the situation, but not at you."

I didn't say anything. Ines stepped closer and hugged me. "I saw the photos. Fina looked so happy in them. I don't understand. I never will."

I touched her back. "Me neither."

Samuel had taken a couple of photos while he'd attended the wedding. It had been a risky move, one he'd insisted on making. He'd been certain Remo's feelings—whatever nature they were—would protect him, and they had. Samuel had returned unscathed and with interesting insights into the dynamics of the Falcone clan.

He'd stayed true to his word and not gone behind my back, even if I could guess how difficult it must have been for him to admit Fina had contacted him. Maybe he would have kept it a secret if Remo hadn't reached out to him as well.

It was a mystery to me what went on in his twisted brain, and I didn't waste time on it anymore. While war with the Famiglia and Camorra was still going strong, we all resorted to obligatory attacks on our delivery trucks or outposts—for the time being. It was a respite that wouldn't last forever.

We all had something to lose. Wives, children.

Ines pulled back. "I'm happy for you and Val. I can't wait to hold my niece in my arms." She smiled bravely. "And what do I hear about you having political ambitions."

"Not me. I'm not good at schmoozing others."

"You prefer to give orders and have them obeyed."

I tilted my head. "But we're making efforts to establish bonds with the political elite."

"It's just another shark tank, isn't it? Intrigue is their form of public torture."

I smiled because Ines hit the nail on the head as usual.

"Dad, can Samuel show me how to shoot a crossbow?"

Val's eyes widened. She always worried about Leonas but I was glad he was daring. "Sure."

"Be careful!" Val added as Samuel and Leonas walked outside. Anna and Sofia followed curiously, their heads together as they whispered excitedly.

Val hurried over to me. "A crossbow?"

I chuckled and rubbed her side. "He'll be fine."

"Why don't we settle on the porch and watch the spectacle?" Pietro suggested.

Val didn't need to be told twice. She wanted to keep an eye on Leonas. We settled in chairs outside but Val

practically perched on the very edge. “Don’t stand so close, Anna, Sofia!”

The girls took a few steps away from Samuel and Leonas but Val moved closer. Her pregnancy had made her even more protective.

“She’s overprotective,” Pietro said. “I’m surprised she agreed to have Anna go to school.”

“It was actually her idea. She wants our daughter to grow up normally, or as normal as is possible. And Santino will be with Anna at all times.”

Pietro’s gaze settled on Santino who sat with the other guards in front of their cabin. “I’m surprised you chose someone that young to guard your daughter.”

“He’s one of the best. An attacker will have a hard time getting past him.”

“Still. He’s a good-looking guy.”

I cocked an eyebrow. “He’s ten years older than Anna and she’s a kid. He’s good at his job.” Not to mention that he knew what would happen to him if I ever caught him looking at my daughter with more than professional interest.

Pietro shrugged. “Your age difference to Val is bigger. Danilo made his point very clear when it came to choosing Sofia’s bodyguards. They need to be my age, and he insists she’s being homeschooled, which we’d wanted to do anyway after the thing with…” He trailed off, pain flashing in his eyes.

“Understandable,” I said, allowing Pietro to gather himself. The wound of Serafina’s loss was still fresh. Maybe it

would never heal completely. “Anna will probably be promised to Clifford Clark.”

Pietro looked surprised. “Really? His father agreed?”

“He’s open to the suggestion. His wife and father are in favor of the bond, and he enjoys spending the money we gave him as an incentive. It’s not going to be official for a while. We have to see how things go between us but it’s a possibility.”

“I never thought you’d consider marrying Anna to an Outsider.” It was a difficult decision, one I still wasn’t entirely comfortable with, but Val had made a valid point. Anna would be safe in a marriage with a politician. She’d grown up among Made Men, she’d be able to handle a mere Outsider and it would open many doors for her. She loved art exhibitions and music. As the fiancée of a politician’s son who would undoubtedly follow in his father’s footsteps as well, she’d have the opportunity to study art or music.

Anna laughed when Leonas missed his target by several yards and as usual, it filled me the sense of peace that had been absent from my life so often in the past.

Valentina

Beatrice was born on the hottest day of the summer, in the last few hours of August. As with Leonas I had gone full term.

Returning home with our daughter filled me with relief and joy, especially when I saw Anna's and Leonas' excitement over the newest addition to our family. Leonas was relieved over not being the youngest anymore, and Anna was just excited about having a little sister she could potentially dress up.

"She looks like Leonas!" Anna said as she looked down at Beatrice in her crib. "Can I hold her?"

"Here," I picked Beatrice up and showed Anna how to hold her. When Leonas had been born, she had been too young to hold him.

Leonas watched curiously but made no move to hold her as well. He glanced up at his dad almost questioningly. Dante only smiled but his eyes followed everything closely.

I handed Beatrice to Anna who cradled her carefully. "Oh, she's heavier than she looks."

Leonas rolled his eyes.

"Why don't you hold her too?" I suggested.

He nodded slowly and came closer. Anna proudly demonstrated how to hold Beatrice before she handed her to her brother.

"My heart's going to explode," I whispered as I moved to Dante's side.

"It's something I never considered in my future when Carla died. I was willing to give up without a fight even if it isn't in my nature to admit defeat. I'm glad you came into my life and showed me that love is worth taking risks."

I smiled up at him. “I know you prefer to take safe gambles but I’m glad you bet on me.”

Dante chuckled. “A safe bet you aren’t that’s true. You keep me on my toes, Val. I’ve never met anyone who tests my patience more often than you do.”

I nodded toward Leonas. “Give it a few more years. I’m sure he’ll fight me for the position.”

Dante moved his eyes skyward. “Don’t tempt fate.”

“You don’t believe in fate.”

“I don’t. But Leonas having your temper can only be fate’s way to pay me back.”

“We all just want to keep you young and agile.”

Dante kissed my lips.

“Ewww, can’t you do that behind closed doors?” Leonas shouted, waking Beatrice who began crying. His eyes grew wide in shock.

Dante walked over to him with a stern expression. “Troublemaker.” He didn’t say it angrily and Leonas only grinned as Dante took Beatrice from him.

He rocked Beatrice gently while Anna hovered next to him. Dante kissed the top of her head then Beatrice’s forehead. “Can I call her Bea?”

“As long as she’s this small she can’t really say no,” Dante said with a chuckle.

Anna grinned, her eyes gleaming excitedly. “I can’t wait to dress her up. I’ve seen so many cute plaid outfits.”

“She’s not a *doll*,” Leonas said.

“You’re a *dork*.”

Leonas jumped at her and tickled her. She shrieked and tried to shove him off but he was almost her height.

Beatrice mewled. I opened my arms. “My cue to nurse her. You can play referee.”

Dante slid Bea into my arms. “All right. Can’t be worse than listening to Clark senior’s never-ending stories from his youth.”

Dante let Giovanni and Dario do most of the political schmoozing, but on occasion, it was required for us to make appearances, especially on social events. Working our way into certain circles proved challenging, mainly because we were still regarded as more of an oddity or attraction than a part of the scene. Yet, people were curious and that was better than suspicion.

Dante preferred our circles, the directness of them, our rules. He was doing this for our children, guaranteeing a safer future for all of them, especially Leonas, and I was grateful for it. He was a family man through and through, the best husband and father I could imagine.



Bea was down for her nap. At six months old, her naptime routine worked like a clockwork.

Anna and Leonas were in the library doing homework, which would keep them busy for a while.

I knocked at Dante’s office and slipped in without waiting for his reply.

Making time for ourselves had become a challenge with three kids and our social responsibilities, so I made sure to use every chance we got.

Dante looked up with a hint of annoyance then he leaned back. He knew the look on my face.

“How about we go upstairs for a bit?”

Dante pushed his chair back and motioned me closer.

Frowning, I headed toward him. “Are you too busy?”

When I was beside him, he gripped me, turned me around and pulled me down on his lap. He pushed up my skirt then spread my legs with his thighs. Pressing a hot kiss to my neck, he slipped his hand into my panties and shoved two fingers into me. My head fell back as he fingered me.

“What if someone walks in?” I gasped out, but my walls clenched tightly around Dante’s fingers, needing more. I hadn’t even locked the office and while the kids would never barge into our bedroom, they might do it in Dante’s office. His fingers slowed but didn’t stop and he nipped my throat.

“They always knock before they enter. Everyone follows my rules, except for you, Val.” The growly note to his voice made me shiver.

I opened my lips to protest, but Dante flicked his thumb over my bundle of nerves. Soon I was panting and grinding myself shamelessly against his hand and the erection digging into my backside.

“On your knees,” he ordered, pulling his fingers out of me before I’d come.

Stifling my protest, because it would only make Dante tease me more, I turned around and gave him a seductive smile before I sank down between his legs.

I didn’t take my eyes off him as I opened his zipper and took out his cock. Dante’s fingers tangled in my hair as I began blowing him. Dante’s breathing deepened.

Steps thundered down the hall before a half-hearted knock sounded.

My eyes widened and I jerked back. Dante pushed me under his desk and dragged his chair closer to hide his open pants.

“Dad, Anna keeps—”

“Didn’t I tell you to wait until I give you permission to enter?” Dante said sternly. I covered my mouth with my hand, worried my breathing was too loud. Even worse: a hysterical laugh wanted to burst forth, even if the situation wasn’t funny in the slightest.

“Yes, but—”

I stared at Dante’s erection right in front of my face and again had to fight down giggles. This was just too much.

“Is this a matter of life and death?”

“No,” Anna said. “Leonas is just—”

“Then it can wait. I’m working. Are you done with your homework?”

“No,” Leonas began and Dante cut in. “Then you should do that.”

“Where’s Mom?” Anna asked.

“She’s busy.”

I bit my lower lip, sure I’d lose it any moment now.

“In her office?” Leonas guessed.

“Do not disturb her. You need to figure out your conflicts by yourself.”

“Okay,” they said simultaneously. I didn’t understand how Dante could talk to them as if nothing was the matter when our kids had almost caught us in the act. I dug my teeth harder into my lip.

“Now back to your homework.”

“Okay,” Leonas grumbled.

Then steps sounded and the door clicked shut. I released a small breath then laughed quietly against Dante’s thigh. Dante’s fingers tangled in my hair as he pushed his chair back a bit to look down at me. “Keep sucking.”

“Dante—”

He gently pushed me closer to his cock. “Suck my cock, Val.”

With an indignant huff, I took him into my mouth and really worked him deeply. Soon my arousal returned full force, the almost blunder forgotten.

Dante’s hips twitched, a clear sign that he was getting closer.

“Enough.”

I pulled back and Dante got up, holding out his hand for me. I took it and he pulled me to my feet. “Bent over the desk.”

I began to shake my head but he walked over to the door and engaged the lock. I laughed, couldn't help it. "That was close."

He stalked toward me and kissed me hard. "Over the desk, Val." Pulling my skirt up to expose my ass, I leaned over the desk then smiled coyly at Dante who rubbed his erection slowly. Exposed like this, I felt naughty and impossibly aroused.

He stepped close to me and began to rub his tip over my sensitive folds, up and down, parting me. A low groan rumbled in his chest when he pushed in slowly. I gripped the edge of the desk, my eyes rolling back.

Soon I had to press my lips together to keep in moans and Dante's grunts became less controlled as well. I was beyond caring. The library was far enough from the office.

"Harder," I begged, and Dante complied, digging his fingers into my hips. We were both getting closer when Dante moved back. "Turn around," he said. I slowly rolled over until I lay on my back across his desk. We were creating a complete mess on his papers. I'd never cared less. Since Bea's birth, we'd made careful love in our bed at night when the kids were asleep. This was the first wild fuck and I craved it like a drug.

Dante hooked his arms under my thighs and jerked me against him, impaling me on his length. He bent over me as he pounded into me and kissed me passionately, swallowing my moans. His jacket caged me in. God, nothing was sexier than Dante taking me fully clothed in his three-piece suit.

The photo frame tumbled off the desk and a pen holder rattled in the most annoying way. I pressed my heels into Dante's back, arching against him as pleasure radiated from my center into every nerve-ending of my body. Dante groaned into my mouth and twitched inside of me as my walls spasmed around him.

"Wow," I breathed.

Dante smiled.

Steps thundered down the hall once more, a knock sounded then the handle moved down, but the lock prevented a debacle.

Dante shook his head with an exasperated laugh.

The handle rattled. "Dad?" Leonas called.

"Is it locked?" Anna asked distantly.

Dante breathed into my ear. "Why did you have to hand down your aversion to closed doors to our son?"

I giggled into his shoulder, clenching around him again. He sucked in a quiet breath.

"Dad?" Leonas' voice became almost indignant. Maybe he thought Dante was playing a prank on him. The handle jiggled again.

"Daadd?"

"He inherited your stubborn nature as well," Dante said.

I gave him a look. He straightened and began cleaning himself with a few tissues. I did the same, trying to look halfway decent.

"Dad!" Now Leonas sounded almost angry.

I stifled laughter.

“He’s going to drive me to the brink,” Dante muttered as he smoothed back his hair and straightened his tie.

“How do I look?”

“Thoroughly satisfied.”

I pursed my lips. “Dante.”

“Your hairdo is messed up.”

I peered into the window and let my hair down. It *was* a mess.

Dante headed toward the door, and I perched innocently on the desk.

The moment Dante unlocked the door, Leonas stumbled inside. When he spotted me, his frown deepened. “Mom, why are you here?”

Anna’s eyes twisted with horror as if she had a suspicion. “Oh man,” she got out. She turned on her heel and stalked away.

Leonas watched her disappear with confusion.

“What’s so important that it can’t wait until I’m done with work?” Dante asked firmly.

“Anna’s done with homework and wanted to dress up Bea. I told her she can’t.”

“That was so important you tried to rip out my door handle?”

Leonas glanced at me. “Anna thinks Bea is her responsibility because she’s the older one, but I’m the boy. I will be the man in the house when Dad’s gone.”

“Already planning my early death?” Dante asked with a hint of dry humor.

Leonas' eyes grew wide. "No! I mean when you're out for business. I'm the man then."

Dante touched Leonas' shoulder. "When I'm not home, you're supposed to keep an eye on your sisters and Mom, but that requires that you follow orders, especially the guards' orders as long as you aren't old enough to protect yourself and our family. A man needs to know his responsibilities and right now yours is to make your homework."

"Okay," Leonas said reluctantly.

He trudged away.

I gave Dante a lingering kiss before I went in search of Anna to see how disturbed she actually was. I found her in Bea's nursery, looking through outfits. "Are you okay?" I asked.

"Please don't give me the talk again," Anna begged, her cheeks turning red. "I just want to pretend you and Dad aren't doing stuff."

I bit my lip, stifling amusement. "All right."

"I'm looking for a cute outfit for Bea for the afternoon. Luisa is coming over and I want to show her how cute Bea is in plaid."

Anna was growing up so fast. Now her interest in fashion was almost as big as in art. Almost thirteen, my God. Time flew. Sometimes she already drove me up the wall with her first tentative teenage antics.

Bea began squirming in her crib. "I think you're in luck."

I lifted Bea out of her bed and she beamed up at me with sleepy green eyes. She had inherited Dante’s blond hair and my eyes, a combination that always got admiring glances.

“This?” Anna held up a plaid dress and a white romper with frills around the neckline. I let Anna change Bea’s nappy and dress her, then took over so Anna could put on a matching outfit.

She came out of her room in a plaid skirt and a beige cashmere sweater, beaming. She looked so grown up then, and absolutely stunning. It was strange to hold one baby girl in my arms while my first baby girl was ready to hit puberty with full speed.



An hour later, I stood on the porch, wrapped in a thick coat and a blanket around Bea and me while I watched Leonas, Anna, and Luisa engage in one of the most enthusiastic snowball fights I’d ever seen. They laughed loudly as they pummeled each other with snowballs. It had snowed all morning and our garden had turned into a winter wonderland.

Anna giggled then shrieked when Leonas’ snowball hit her butt.

One moment half grown-up, the next back to being children. What a strange phase in life, but one I didn’t want to miss. Despite Bea’s need for attention, I was determined

to spend as much time with Leonas and Anna as possible. Before I could blink, they'd be adults.

Hands came down on my shoulders and Dante brushed a kiss against my cheek, then pressed another one to Bea's head. "Isn't it too cold for you?"

I shook my head. "I'll come in soon. I don't want to miss this. Who knows if Anna's still going to enjoy snowball fights next year?"

Dante wrapped his arms around me. "Already becoming wistful?"

I shrugged. "I just want to enjoy every day, every single second. I'm so happy right now. I want to conserve this exact moment and keep it in my memory forever."

"So many moments of happiness still lie ahead of us, Val."

I turned away from the fight to look up at Dante. "That's my line." I was the one who always tried to see the positive.

Dante chuckled. "You've rubbed off on me over the years." He kissed me and Leonas groaned loudly. Then cried out in surprise as Luisa hit him in the face.

I shook my head, laughing but then became serious at the look on Dante's face.

"Fourteen years, and I'm still waiting for the day when you don't make me love you a little more every second I spend with you."

I blinked. "That's a lot of love over the years," I got out. "But you started on a very low level."

Dante ran his thumb over my cheek. “I’m not without failure. I’ve made so many mistakes over the years. You and our children aren’t one of them, and every moment of suffering, of pain, of uncertainty was worth it, because it ultimately brought me to this moment.”

“I love you,” I said quietly, trying very hard not to cry. Anna had already suffered one moment of mortification today. If I started bawling in front of Luisa without any apparent reason, she’d experience her second.

Dante’s hold on me tightened. “And I love you, and every day a little more even if it seems impossible.”

“It’s a good thing that love’s infinite,” I said softly. Dante pulled me even tighter against him and Bea beamed up at him. Leonas and Anna laughed boisterously.

Surrounded by endless love. It couldn’t get any better than that.

THE END

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Cora is the author of the Born in Blood Mafia Series, the Camorra Chronicles and many other books, most of them featuring dangerously sexy bad boys. She likes her men like her martinis—dirty and strong.

Cora lives in Germany with a cute but crazy Bearded Collie, as well as the cute but crazy man at her side. When she doesn’t spend her days dreaming up sexy books, she plans her next travel adventure or cooks too spicy dishes from all over the world.

GLOSSARY

This isn’t a complete list of all characters in my mafia world, only the most important characters featuring in this book. Some explanations might be spoilery for later parts of this book.

Adamo Falcone—Youngest brother of Remo Falcone.

Anna Cavallaro—Daughter of Valentina and Dante.

Aria Vitiello—Oldest daughter of Rocco Scuderi and wife of Luca Vitiello.

Arturo—Enforcer of the Outfit.

Bibiana Fabbri—Valentina’s best friend and cousin.

Camorra—The ruling mob family in the West.

Capo—The head of a mob family.

Captain—Fourth rank in my mafia world. Capo>Consigliere>Underboss>Captain

They rule over a number of soldiers and are responsible for certain business areas in a territory.

Consigliere—A Consigliere is the personal adviser for the Capo.

Danilo Mancini—Underboss in Indianapolis, Serafina’s ex-fiancé.

Dante Cavallaro—Capo of the Outfit.

Enforcer—Responsible for the dirty work. Puts pressure on debtors.

Enzo Bianchi—Valentina’s bodyguard.

Fabiano Scuderi—Son of Rocco Scuderi and Enforcer of the Camorra.

Famiglia—Leading mob family in the East.

Gabby—Maid in the Cavallaro household.

Gianna Vitiello—Second daughter of Rocco Scuderi and wife of Matteo Vitiello.

Giovanni Aresco—Father of Orazio and Valentina, and Underboss in Chicago. Later, Consigliere of the Outfit.

Ines Mione—Dante’s sister and Pietro’s wife.

Leonas Cavallaro—Dante’s and Valentina’s son.

Liliana Vitiello—youngest daughter of Rocco Scuderi and wife of Romero Cancio.

Livia Aresco—Mother of Valentina and Orazio, and wife of Giovanni.

Luca Vitiello—Capo of the Famiglia.

Matteo Vitiello—Consigliere of the Famiglia and Luca’s brother.

Nino Falcone—Consigliere of the Camorra and Remo’s oldest brother.

Orazio Aresco—Son of Livia and Giovanni, brother of Valentina. Later: Underboss in Boston.

Outfit—Leading mob family in the Mid-West.

Pietro Mione—Dante’s brother-in-law and Ines’ husband. Underboss in Minneapolis.

Remo Falcone—Capo of the Camorra.

Riccardo Scuderi—Youngest son of Rocco Scuderi with his second wife.

Rocco Scuderi—(Former) Consigliere of Dante Cavallaro.

Rocco Jr. Scuderi—Oldest son of Rocco Scuderi with his second wife.

Samuel Mione—Son of Pietro Mione. Dante’s nephew.

Santino Bianchi—Son of Enzo Bianchi. Second Enforcer of the Outfit.

Serafina Mione—Oldest daughter of Pietro and Ines Mione.

Sofia Mione—Youngest daughter of Pietro and Ines Mione.

Taft—Valentina’s second bodyguard.

Tommaso Bonello—One of Dante’s Captains. Husband of Bibiana.

Underboss—Rules over a city and its surroundings in the Capo’s name.

Valentina Cavallaro—Wife of Dante Cavallaro.

Zita—Maid in the Cavallaro household.